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AILIEFORD.

CHAPTER I.

EVERY man has his own report to make of this wonderful human life which we live day by day unconsciously, forming history unawares. I do not expect that my experience contains anything more remarkable than the experience of other men—still it is individual. I have reached to an unusual quietness now, and more rest and leisure than I quite know what to do with; and if one

cannot work one may talk—it is the privilege of an old man.

The house in which I am now living was once a farm-house; when, I cannot remember, but all its arrangements corroborate its history. A two-story house, with a rounded projection in its centre to contain the staircase, a low door opening into the little brick-floored kitchen, and a collection of low small-windowed rooms within. Outside, the garden is in but indifferent order, noted for little more than the great white rose-tree looking in at the staircase window, and the hedge of lilacs round the enclosure, which has much more wealth in potatoes and cabbages than in flowers; and some jargonel pear-trees, wonderful in their generation, and berry-bushes, famous and well-remembered, keeping a corner in many an old world-hardened memory, of greyheaded men like me who were young when I was young.

For I was born here, and in this very

room my mother had her parlour. We were three of us, boys; and had for our father a man, not blameless by any means, but whose faults were institutions with us, parts of himself which it never occurred to us to speculate upon. Our income, I suppose, might be about a hundred pounds a-year—certainly not more; and upon this, the family of us in the parlour, and Marget, strong and ruddy, in the kitchen, lived with singular comfort. I recollect no appearance of pinching or penury about our domestic life, and we were moulds of fashion in respect to bonnets and jackets for half the school. True my mother came to a dead stop sometimes, opposite a small account, and pondered with painful calculations over the means of paying it; but it always was paid—and we boys had the most perfect trust in the immense capabilities of the family income.

We went to school at Moulisburgh, a

cheerful little town on the coast, three miles from home; and at six o'clock in the morning, in all weathers, we set out with our satchels and fresh faces from Ailieford. Andrew had a magnificent camlet cloak with a collar of lambskin and a brass hook-and-eye, worthy to have fastened the garments of a giant; and I recollect for my own habiliments, some time after, a long white great-coat with tails; but how Jamie and I fared in rainy days at that time I forget now—though it is impossible to forget Andrew's camlet cloak.

In the neighbourhood of our humble house, stood a great old decayed and decaying mansion, grand and dilapidated, with immense blocked-up, ruined staircases which no one attempted to ascend, and a wilderness of vacant windows staring out like blank idiot eyes upon a prospect which I, for my own part, have seldom seen equalled. For Edinburgh, with its couched lion, with its

castle, and spires, and pillars, and wimple of grey mist, lay before us, within reach even of our parlour windows, over many a slope of fertile land, lying close at our door; and when we ran with resounding feet down the brae with its avenue of trees, past Ailieford house, to reach the high-road, the Firth burst upon us—the noble, unlaborious Firth, which lives on its beauties and its memories. At that time, great was our reverence for the passing schooner which threw a speck of white upon its breadth of water; and a war-ship, now and then, on its way to Leith, produced a fever of excitement among us, and sent us down to the links in bands when school-hours were over, almost forgetful of the adjourned game of shinty; and for our parts, the three brothers of us—though we had appetites anything but inconsiderable—entirely eclipsing the dinner which waited us at home.

At Ailieford our playmates were sturdy

fellows, altogether unconscious of refinement, though Michael Anderson on his little creepie by his mother's fireside, where the firelight was the only midnight oil, learned his Latin lesson as well as we did, if it did him quite as little service. We stripped the bark off the trees to twist strings for our "dragons," till the next land proprietor issued threatenings and notices. We made superb bows of ash. We had an indiscriminate appetite for turnips and young peas, and could roast potatoes to perfection; for though under very wholesome discipline at home, we were perfectly unrestrained abroad, and our grade above our cottar neighbours was marked with the most distinct line—so they did nothing to restrain our pranks, and sufficiently wild some of them were.

And in the winter evenings, our little low-roofed kitchen was an unparalleled place for fun; its red brick floor, as clean as Marget's sturdy hands could make it—its white hearth,

and great rejoicing fire, burning in the dark, thick glass of the uncurtained window, and gleaming wherever it had a chance to gleam —the great brown chest which stood against the wall—the well-scoured kitchen-table—the neatly spread bed in the corner—I remember all as clearly as if the Hogmanay guisards had danced there only last night.

In the parlour, we had a long dining-table, and old-fashioned mahogany chairs, two small windows with tolerably deep recesses, where my mother sat at work in summer, and a shelf near the fire-place full of books, among which were some collections of story and verse, which I still could almost repeat by heart. The room was low in the roof, and I suppose nothing very great in the furniture, but it was a home room pleasant to see.

I cannot tell what kind of characters my brothers Andrew and Jamie had; they were our Andrew and our Jamie—had their faults,

their excellencies—did things at which the rest of us sometimes wept, and sometimes smiled, but always said, "it is just like him," so that they *had* distinct personalities is very sure—but I never was an anatomist of character. Least of all, could I ever anatomize them, my own flesh and blood.

If I had not been tempted to tell stories of other people, I should scarcely have thought of telling my own; and I dare say even you, my young friend, though you were a boy the other day, would scarcely care to hear the detail of my boyhood. In England, you don't know the shinty—we are innocent of cricket; but cricket—no disparagement to the sport—is something formal and of set purpose, requiring time and place and premeditation, which we sometimes had not to give; whereas the ball that bounded a quarter of a mile before us, down the brae and through these three frosty miles of road, quickened our schoolboy feet, and made our cold cheeks

glow, as we went off at a gallop after it, with our sticks, eager for the next blow. Jackets, growing slightly short in the arms, trowsers a little abbreviated at the ancles—woollen comforters, exhibiting in high relief the red and blue ears which rested upon them —short shinty sticks with the indispensable curve at the end—woollen mittens worn in our pockets—with a load of books transferred now and then from one to the other, as the exigencies of the play demanded—such was our outward semblance as schoolboys.

A little sister came home to us for a year or two, a vision of pleasure more refined and delicate than had ever dawned on us before. Little Mary! I fancy everybody recollects some little Mary—some fairy visitor to the home which looks so drear and blank when the child goes back to its native heaven. This one of ours was four years with us, I think—had learned to run about through the narrow passage with some steadiness of pace,

to be above a little knot in the carpet, and superior to the irregularities of the red kitchen floor, and had acquired a pretty language all her own, full of odd, sweet, kindly diminutives, which made music of our common-place schoolboy names.

We were the most devoted slaves of this little princess of ours; she rode on our shoulders; she tugged our hair; with her infant passions and pleadings and imperiousnesses, she made us subjects of the little capricious woman's will that inhabited her; and she charmed us with wiles so artless and simple. Little Mary!—well—well—she might have been somebody's wife, somebody's mother, a hundred or a thousand miles off, smiling at the old bachelor brother who was little more to her than a recollection, if she had been living now.

But I remember how her dresses, her toys, her little shoes and pinafores, were put away by themselves solemnly, all wetted with tears,

and how a little scrap of muslin which had been sent by some one for a frock to Mary just on the eve of her last illness, became something mysterious and sorrowful, which had to be laid by too, and could never be profaned by use of another. I believe we boys soon recovered this, though it moved us deeply; but great was the effect on the household. It was like a visible withdrawing of sunshine; and my mother, whose memory seemed to carry every measure of the natural country music, and whose voice used to pass on, with scarcely a pause, from song to song, to little Mary's delight and ours—my mother never sang again.

But we went on nevertheless, and everything else around us, in the ordinary routine. So many a little Mary passes away, and the world cannot linger even to look at the small new hillocks, where they lie so thick and close together over all the land. Shortly after, it came to be full time for Andrew leaving school;

and after much consultation about his future destiny, he was at last—a sufficiently humble fate you will think—apprenticed to a grocer in Moulisburgh, to "serve his time" for five years.

Andrew himself had no objection—the novelty of this new life was as attractive to him, as India to a cadet—and he put on his new linen apron, I believe, with as genuine a little thrill of excitement as if it had been a superb uniform, glorious to boyish eyes and vanity. Mr. Bell's shop was in the High Street—a shop occupying a commanding position at the corner of two streets, and having the full sweep of the new bridge—a substantial shop, having customers in the great houses round, and building rows of cottar tenements out of its own unassisted till.

We used to linger about the window after Andrew's advent, and watch the customers on these brilliant Saturday nights. The

young ladies who came to leave an order, the little girls who held down their heads at sight of us, and whispered to each other mysteriously, and sent little bursts of stealthy laughter into the night when they had past. Then there came sometimes collier wives from our own neighbourhood, with here and there a pre-eminently "decent woman" in her dark-printed gown, and snowy cap, the very pattern of law and good order, a working man's wife from Moulisburgh itself; while pressing close on the counter by her side, appeared a fisherwoman, with bulky striped woollen petticoats—one—the blue and white one—just appearing above the pink stripe, which was displayed at full length—and rough blue coat, and the elegant little cap, with its hooding handkerchief.

Perhaps you never saw a fisherwoman in full costume, as she carries her produce to the Edinburgh markets—well, you must look the better at this specimen. She has still

her linen pouch hanging before her, with its division for silver and copper, and you observe a certain stoop in her shoulders, and a peculiar attitude of the head; for she does not feel convinced even now, that she is not carrying the creel. But a pretty, sweet, simple face looks out from the graceful head-dress. She is very young, but she has her "man" at home, and two babies; and when she speaks to respectable Mr. Bell behind the counter, cheapening the necessary tea and sugar, she speaks in affectionate terms, and calls Andrew there beside him "my lamb"—but she does it quite unconsciously, for it is the custom of her craft.

Meanwhile, Jamie and I, standing in the light of the shop-window, observe Andrew with all our eyes, and lay by many a brilliant boyish jest in our memory to ply him with to-morrow, when he comes to spend the Sabbath-day at home.

CHAPTER II.

WHEN Andrew's novitiate had seen out two twelvemonths, and he himself, a head taller than at his entrance, was already Mr. Bell's chief shopman, an autocrat over the two inferior boys, it became time for my entrance on the same busy life. I could not be a grocer like Andrew—would not be a cabinet-maker, or a woollen draper, or any other of the comfortable crafts to which a "genteel" shop in Moulisburgh was possible. I had a hankering after education, and a considerable notion of setting up as a gentle-

man. What could they do with me in Ailieford? So at last, after a good deal of trouble, and many fruitless applications, I was set down in the office of a very small merchant in Edinburgh, and began with all the bewilderment, and something of the exultation of sixteen, the life of independence and solitude.

Not exactly independence—I was to get twenty pounds for my first year's salary, in consideration of the quickness and aptitude for business which I was said to exhibit after a month's trial. The novelty was just beginning to leave me then, but the favourable judgment was made, and pronounced, before the close of my earliest enthusiasm. But my mother's bargain with Mrs. Cockburn for my board could not be concluded at a less rate than fifteen weekly shillings, so that the glorious privilege remained still for me a thing in the future.

And Mrs. Cockburn had a Jessie, a

Georgina, a Bell, a Peter, and a Tom; and in her somewhat crowded house I had only a bed-closet of the very smallest possible dimensions to retire to, so there was little to be said on the point of solitude. Still, I had made my start in the life of manhood, and the boy had his flushes of pride, as well as his fits of dreariness, when he contrasted his unconscious subjection and subordination to the natural law at home, with his individual standing here.

At "the office," I received orders, did the miscellaneous biddings of Messrs. Sellar and Spender, breathed in a quantity of loose dust and sawdust, learned to drink porter, and generally amused myself. My employers were both young, and had very recently begun business. They were agents for a quantity of various commodities, including, among others, the aforesaid porter; and their life was quite an adven-

turous, perilous life, full of "scapes" as narrow as the hair-breadth of Othello.

Mr. Sellar had a gig, and drove about the country, collecting orders. Inns within twenty miles of Edinburgh, in every direction, received him with open arms, and knew him by name as familiarly as they knew the village Dominie. His strong brown pony, an untiring little animal, which set about its work with a spirit and enterprise equal to Mr. Sellar's own, could have guided any benighted traveller through any rural road in Lothian—it had such a perfect knowledge of the Suns and Globes, Black Bulls and White Horses—places of entertainment for man and beast; and it was very seldom that the second seat in Mr. Sellar's gig wanted a companion friend to enliven his journeys.

He was a brown, fresh, ruddy, good-humoured youth himself, with a frankness and simplicity in both manner and character which kept this life from injuring him so

much as it might have been expected to do. He did deteriorate, no doubt, and was on the road to greater deterioration, but this I was not a sufficiently skilful observer to know. I only knew that the dash with which he drew up his gig before the office door, with a constant endeavour to throw Dour Peter, the pony, off his steady balance, was something very grand and captivating to me, a country boy, now, for the first time, caged the livelong day within builded walls; but Dour Peter was not to be surprised or thrown on his haunches. He kept his balance more obstinately than his master was always able to do.

And Mr. Sellar made sales—great sales—and purchases on quite a grand scale; but I used to see very puzzled, and sometimes blank faces examining bills, or letters of apology, when it came to be time for these debtors to pay; and for their own debts, Messrs. Sellar and Spender had an epistolary

power, in the way of explanation and arrangement, which might have equalled Mr. Micawber's own.

Mr. Spender, the stay-at-home partner, kept a set of books in a beautiful hand, and threw off hair-strokes and flourishes, which made the very ledger poetical, and filled me with admiration and innocent envy. Mr. Spender knew a great many people, and a great many people dropped in to see him. Few of these visitors were superior to porter—it was a cool drink in summer, and refreshed them; in winter it was of service to keep out the cold. And after one o'clock Mr. Spender himself went out, and not unfrequently gave me the sole possession of the office till six or seven, when Mathew Strang, the porter, came to close up the place, and let me go away.

Mr. Spender was about five-and-twenty—his partner's age—an alert, intelligent, excitable young man, with a bright eye and

a light step, some refinement, and a great deal of quickness, mental and physical. Full of impulses, and obedient to them as a child—never at a loss for an expedient—thoroughly enjoying and relishing the wild, strange tumult which they called business, with its constant possibility of ruin, and its daily break-neck leaps and ventures—yet, withal, a simple nature, loveable, and full of love.

Such were the merchants, potent, grave and prudent, under whose instruction, and with the benefit of whose example, I began my mercantile life.

Before long the set of books came into my hands, and I did all I could to emulate the flourishes of Mr. Spender. Besides them, there came to me from the same liberal master, the right of admission to an adjacent library, full of novels. I had much spare time, and an indiscriminate boyish appetite. You may guess what followed—but let me first show you my study.

A rather large oblong room, with boxes of samples on shelves, and sundry baskets cobwebbed and sawdusted, containing dozens and half-dozens of our famous porter. Here and there a bottle, with its neck laid carefully beside it like the head of St. Denis, lay on the floor under the shelter of the lowest shelf; beside it, a basket tilted up on one side, made visible proclamation with its corkless open mouths, that its careful enclosure defended nothing but a certain weight of glass. I do not quite know where the sawdust came from—certainly it was a prominent feature of the place, and lay here and there indiscriminately, as if with a vague conviction that in itself it was highly ornamental, and an advantage to the floor it encumbered. The fire-place was in the side of the room just opposite the door, which stood always open, and admitted most days of the year a brisk friendly wind, which did not hesitate to lay hands upon

you sometimes, and always strongly recalled to you the salutations of Mr. Sellar. Encroaching upon the broad window which nearly filled the end of the office, was a high desk with sufficient space for two writers. Mr. Spender was neat in his personal habits, and the desk had a fragrant reminiscence of Russia leather about it, and had very few ink-stains, and quite a handsome writing apparatus. The window upon which it pressed so closely, reminded you strongly of a port-wine bottle, and was not adapted for the ordinary purposes of windows; for vainly Mr. Spender's friends reconnoitred from without, and vainly I myself investigated from within. The windows veiled the street in a fog as thick and brown as November, and our smoky oil-lamp burned in the yellow panes like a dim far-away fire.

On a high stool before this desk, and fronting the crusted glass which dust and

cobwebs seemed to have thickened to the substance of a wall, with one volume out of the four or five to which a liberal public then permitted a novel to run, laid open upon the front of the open ledger—with both my elbows rested upon my own and Mr. Spender's flourishes, and the top of my head looming through the mist upon passers-by without—it was thus I entered into the mysteries of commerce, the cares and struggles of commercial life.

Down-stairs in the cellar which throws its inviting light up into the early winter darkness, Mathew Strang, newly returned with a wilderness of empty bottles from delivering a late order, speaks with a sonorous hum which reaches me drowsily from the depths. Mathew, who is altogether too sensible a man to deny to his master's usual practice his own countenance and support, has a friend in with him to taste the porter, and I can hear a box of soap rattle down

upon his great shoulders, as he reaches up for a loose bottle; never mind—Mathew, beer sustained, thinks nothing of the soap.

And I, though I can hear the hum of Mathew's speech, and am quick to note any approaching step, which may seem to demand a dive within the desk with my book, am in reality breathless with anxiety for Ethelind, who has just been carried off in a mystic chariot. I have no doubt it is the young earl whom she has rejected so often who does this violence now—villain and coward!—but neither I nor any other true champion near can fly to the rescue at sound of the injured Ethelind's cries.

Mr. Sellar just now is driving along the dark, glancing road, with its many lights and depths of shadow, on his way to the bachelor house of the friend who has been out with him to-day, where they are to have a gay young man's party. Dour Peter throws up his head, and tosses it in the sharp, kindly

air, shaking his fringed fore-foot as he dashes on at a half-gallop; and foot-passengers hear the laughter that rings past them, and look after the little flying equipage and the young, gay, buoyant strength which it carries to further pleasure. Mr. Spender, in a room brightened with mystic firelight, where there is nothing distinct to mar the witchery of his more delicate enjoyment, puts a little jewelled ring on a small finger, and speaks of a future, splendid to the girl's heart that listens. The girl's heart is a fresh and true one, but an innocent little natural vanity tingles in it, as it hears what Mrs. Spender's future household and means shall be; and the voice that speaks exults so happily in the power to confer all this upon the bride.

So the establishment of Messrs. Sellar and Spender enjoys itself. We came over a great threatening evil to-day—we—for if Sellar and Spender were ruined, the prospect

would be very gloomy for Mathew, with his fourteen shillings a-week, and me with my twenty pounds a-year. Never mind, I say; this evening we lie down, all of us, and sleep with the most perfect comfort and satisfaction, not ruined for this day; and as for what may come to pass on the morrow let time and the hour decide.

CHAPTER III.

THE street is dark, but looks imposing in its darkness, and lights glimmer all over the great front of those blank houses, not in regular rows as if great rooms were lighted, but in faint patches, a radiant window here and there. Some shutters are closed, some families do not use the parlour, the room of state—but that gleam up there in the third story, where you see a substantial shadow breaking upon the light, comes from Mrs. Cockburn's parlour, whither I am bound, with two remaining volumes of Ethelind in

my pocket, and with a very considerable appetite for the bread and butter which shall accompany my tea.

I say the street looks imposing with its great mansion-houses and the broad gloom through which they appear darkly like shadows; and it is a street in the New Town, moreover, a fact of which Mrs. Cockburn is only too ready to remind you, though it is no very great house which we reach after these three flights of stairs. Two doors meet you at every landing-place—the right-hand one here is Mrs. Cockburn's; and being admitted by the owner of the shadow, Georgina—Geordie, as she is called—we enter through a dark passage into one of the two rooms at the end, which front to the street. The lobby has two other doors beside these, one of them admitting to the kitchen, and one to my bed-closet—but exclusive of this little den of mine, Mrs. Cockburn has but three apartments to lodge her family in.

The parlour is a good-sized room, lofty and well-proportioned, and looks larger than it really is, in the hazy twilight which this one candle confers upon it. The fire is not in great condition just now; you can hear it, indeed, making audible efforts to burn, with fierce, repulsed, defeated heat hissing against the new supply of moistened coals with which little Bell, Mrs. Cockburn's youngest daughter and servant, has just supplied it. Bell, in her printed pinafore and somewhat scanty frock, and with her little thin strings of hair, put up in a small, scrubby, old-womanish knot behind, kneels before the fire with a little brush in her hand, sweeping the bars of the grate elaborately, and filling all the red hair of Peter, who has been crouching close to the fireside, reading by the now extinguished flame, with a dust of powdery ashes.

Miss Jessie, eldest hope of the Cockburn household, apprentice to a dress-maker, and already privately in the evenings making gowns

"for her own hand," has possession of one side of the table, and of the candle. She has red hair too, like her little brother—hair very decidedly and unequivocally red—but a well-favoured, well-complexioned face, and a very pretty texture and gloss upon this same hair which neutralises its colour. She looks neat, too, with her little linen collar, and the black ribbon tied round her neck under it, not unlike my own neckcloth, one of those little allowable adaptations of masculine costume which look so very much the reverse of masculine.

Georgina, who follows me into the family apartment, is a tall, gaunt girl of fifteen, largely developed at the elbows and wrists, and wearing a species of apparel which greatly mortifies her growing consciousness of maturity and womanhood; for Geordie had her hair cut long ago in consequence of a fever, and now, instead of the tight twist on the top of the head which confers dignity

upon the dusty, broken locks of little Bell, Geordie's soft brown hair curls lovingly round her neck, "like a little bairn's," as she herself says indignantly; for Geordie is not quite sure that it was not malice aforethought, and a conspiracy on the part of doctor and mother, which deprived her of her first crop of wiry hair. And over the rough woollen tartan frock, with its waist encroaching on her very arms, Geordie is still sentenced to wear a long cotton pinafore, instead of the smart apron with pockets which glorifies her sister. As she comes in after me, Geordie draws the string which holds this pinafore round her neck, and loops it up on her chin with evident sulkiness.

Poor Geordie! she is a little sullen, it must be confessed, and has strange comical prides and susceptibilities, as at her years girls so often have; but there is good under the "gloom" which does not by any means

add to her attractions, though these attractions are not abundant by nature.

Mrs. Cockburn is in the kitchen. Nay, listen!—a stream of sound gradually becoming articulate and intelligible approaches. She is not in the kitchen, but on her way to edify and enlighten her fireside circle; and now the parlour door swings open, and you see the person which belongs to the voice.

A gown of what people call shawl-pattern —I have seen nothing of the genus for many a year, but had it impressed upon me then by a certain quickness of apprehension I had, for a boy, of the prettinesses of feminine apparel: this was so far from pretty that I remember it—dark cotton stuff sprinkled over with the grotesque oval figures which flourish in shawls, all of them tumbled down in different and diverging lines, out of which the bewildered eye can get no steady outline, give a strange

bulky unevenness and "thraw" to the narrow skirts, out of which rise Mrs. Cockburn's substantial bust and active head. A little shawl guards her shoulders, a great white apron defends the front of the gown, a white muslin "morning cap," as she calls it, with wide borders edged with narrow lace, and nodding with every motion of her head and tongue, covers the mass of reddish hair which lies in great folds upon her forehead. Her eyes are gray, her face alert and vivacious, her lips constantly in motion; and though I noticed at first with amusement the little nods with which head and cap punctuated my landlady's never-failing eloquence, I had long ago ceased to make any account of this perennial stream. The voice, fortunately, is not unpleasant, and Mrs. Cockburn is not so fastidious a talker as to depend on listeners. She speaks for her own pleasure, decent woman, and nobody is disturbed thereby.

"Late, William my man, late! There's Jessie been in half-an-hour, and everybody waiting for their tea. Jessie's no so late noo as she was last winter. I'm no clear whether it's because they're no sae thrang, or if she's just getting mair sense, and disna dally so lang on the way. And there's Peter reading a book at an out fire, and Bell, the little spirit, never ance trying to clear the grate, and gie the coals a chance to burn—making a stour, not a haet else. If onybody was ever trysted with their bairns, it's me!—"

Here Mrs. Cockburn, pushing Bell off her balance, as she advanced, vigorously seized the poker, and came to the rescue of the choking fire, giving Peter an agreeable mixture of small cinders in the white ashy flour with which already his hair had been powdered; but these active operations, under which a hundred little struggling flames came blinking out from their refuge,

did not for an instant suspend the running comment of Mrs. Cockburn's talk.

"Mony ane would blaw this fire now. A blawn fire's like forced love—it never thrives; and if ever there was a real guid sign of a thriftless house, it's hearing aye the bellowses gaun, morning and night. Ye'll no tell me my man mightna have been hame by this time if he had likit. Na, na, I ken better, daidling body as he is. And when a man's no heeding about being hame at his richt hours, it's a miracle what grand excuses he can get. What's keeping Tam next? I'm no heeding—I'll no hae thae decent bairns that have done their day's wark keepit waiting for their tea, on either a flighty callant or a drinking man; so I'll hae the tea ben. Geordie, gang ben for the tea."

It was one of Mrs. Cockburn's principles in speaking, to address no one unless on urgent occasions; for this involved a

necessary pause, perhaps an answer—things which Mrs. Cockburn's spirit hated.

I had already taken my place at the table —as near to Jessie and her candle as I could; this not from any sentimental appreciation of Miss Jessie, but for my Ethelind which already lay open before me. Jessie looked at it under my hand. Sulky Geordie loomed over my shoulder, and had read the page before I was half done; though she went off with disgust to obey her mother just as I turned the leaf.

"It's just like you a'—aye spiting a' body," said Geordie gloomily; and her elder sister laughed. For Geordie, with a voracious appetite for books, and a marvellous faculty of devouring them, was tantalized out of all temper by the snatches she got of mine. A page here and there—sometimes half a volume; and though she never reached the end of one story, she was always ready to snatch her morsel of the next, and

fume over the impossibility of seeing it ended. With a boy's natural delight in tormenting, I aggravated the trials of Geordie not a little.

The tea came; and Peter and Bell assumed their places at the table, Geordie placing herself beside me, and reading furiously in defiance of calls upon her from every other person present—for there was something quite irresistible to us all in the power of calling forth Geordie's "gloom." And fiercely Geordie gloomed on her brother and sister, and shook her hand at me when I laughingly refused to turn the leaf. "Ye've naething to do the haill night but read, and naebody stops ye either through the day," grumbled Geordie "but a woman's never done working; its braw to be you—and ye'll get a' that read, and anither yin the morn!"

This climax was almost more than Geordie could bear.

An hour after, Tam, like me, a boy-clerk,

but having a very much more severe initiation into his craft than I, came in very brisk and business-like from his office, where he had been kept by extra work, and Geordie, secure in having finished both pages while I had only got over one, rose again with a less lowering brow, to bring in the tea which had been keeping warm in a little jug by the fire, and the bread and butter laid aside on a plate for her favourite brother. At ten o'clock, Mrs. Cockburn's "daidling" husband, "much bemused," came in with solemn unsteadiness and pomp to his arm-chair, the children getting out of his way with great rapidity, not in the least liking to be stumbled over. This man, in the morning, though his brains were daily getting more confused and bewildered, was a man of very tolerable appearance and intelligence. He was fond of his family too, and very kind to them on Sabbath-days, when some natural religious feeling and the strong Scottish instinct, drew

him to church and kept him sober; but his evenings always ended after this miserable fashion. The household were used to it and had long ceased even to lament; unfortunately it was not a very extraordinary case, and they accepted it as a necessity.

CHAPTER IV.

I FOUND favour in the eyes of Messrs. Sellar and Spender. They were both very fresh-hearted and open, and indeed, in many points, little less boyish than myself; and before many months, I, too, knew all the expedients and manifold shifts of their business, knew the desperate state in which their affairs were, their total want of capital, and the perfectly reckless joyous daring with which they plunged at everything in their way. I was a mere boy—a boy of quick apprehension, to whom this sort of excite-

ment was delightful—and never squire followed his master into the thick of foughten field more devotedly than I accompanied mine through all the despairs and exultations which gave a mixture of highly-strained feeling to the common-place affairs of every day.

Mr. Spender's tragic depression when the morning's post, which should have brought some uncertain remittance to pay to-day's bill, came in with such a letter of apology as he himself was skilled in framing—the extreme anxiety of both partners as they dashed away together, chafing Dour Peter into a gallop, to get the money "somewhere"—the magnificent triumph with which Mr. Spender burst into the office on his return, holding aloft to me the bundle of notes, which bore witness to his success—all these were very bad and unbusiness-like, good mercantile people—very ruinous, blameable and improper; I only confess that the

excitement of this real chase, headlong and dangerous, had a strange charm for me, and I should very likely have taken to the sober, regular business much less heartily.

Then I was privileged, sometimes when he had no better companion, to dash away over the broad fresh country with Mr. Sellar, to make memorandums for him while he enjoyed himself, and to enjoy myself no less heartily, with his entire good-will and co-operation. But Mr. Sellar, though I liked him, was a little too breezy and gusty for me—like a March day, rude and loud. I was decidedly more comfortable in the society of Mr. Spender.

With this manner of life in the office, occupying all my more serious hours, and my evenings at Mrs. Cockburn's, with her peaceable stream of soliloquy floating unnoticed by my ear, and nothing of restraint ever attempted towards me, I came to feel myself my own master, and to develop into

fancied manhood rapidly enough. But to do these marvellous fictions justice, great and manifold as are the accusations against them, I cannot think such a course of study—or call it amusement, it was both—as mine, at all injurious to the turning point of sixteen.

By-and-bye, when I came to attend lectures and cultivate my mind, and be great on political questions, the boy died out of me, and a very strange animal called a young man, and believed to be an exceedingly dignified development of existence, began to make itself visible to my consciousness; and sometimes my consciousness, highly-flattered and vain, had great content in the contemplation of this new life. Sometimes there came an uneasy restlessness and discontent to my half-conscious mind; but dangerous though this stage may be, I am glad, for my own part, that my boyhood was prolonged to me in the visionary poetic youth,

with which systematic self-culture, after all, has not a great deal to do.

And on Saturday night, in these winter gloamings, I buttoned my long white great-coat, and wrapped my "comforter" about my neck, and set out home. It was six miles —and not short miles by any means—to Ailieford; but the light of my mother's bright fire danced before my eyes all the way out, and lightened the dreary road almost like sunshine—Arthur's Seat stealing away like some ponderous cloaked figure into the darkness; high above me, a Calton Hill monument striking upon the fading light like a white arm—and myself passing straight forward into the night along the long stretch of blank wall, above which unseen trees rustled their leafless branches over me, while, as I progressed on my road, the prolonged rush of the dark, invisible sea rustling up upon the rocks, bore me strange company.

This sea, quite invisible on these dark winter nights, became a voice to me in my weekly journey; and I can well remember yet, the loud report, like a cannon, with which the white roll of foam, which I could always realize in my imagination, hidden as it was by the deep darkness, came rushing up high over the black bed of low, broken rocks, which disturbed the great stretch of flat beach at one part of the way; nor less distinctly the low, sweet, plaintive voice with which it came and went, as in a fit of gentle musing, in the quiet, dewy, hazy nights of autumn or mild spring.

But the road was dark, and my courage by no means superior to the stories of robbers, which the Ailieford kitchen had trembled at so often—though what inducement any member of this ingenious craft could have to interrupt poor simple me, with sixpence in my pocket and Tom Cockburn's stick in my hand, I cannot very well con-

ceive, unless from pure love of a profession which, after all I fancy, must have been a duller thing considerably than the wild Arab life of my respectable employers, Messrs. Sellar and Spender.

However this may be, I was always extremely well-pleased to approach the straggling lights of Moulisburgh, to cross the bridge, and peer about, so far as I could see before me, on the narrow path for Jamie, who generally came this length to meet me, and whom I was sure, if he did not leap upon my shoulders sooner, of finding safe at the lighted window of Mr. Robert Bell, contemplating Andrew and his customers with meditative gravity.

Then we said three words to Andrew, who was now eighteen, and, in his long white apron, and with his scientific knowledge of tea and sugar—more than that with a faint down upon his cheek, on which he

laid his fingers lovingly, in glorious uncertainty and hope as to what it might come to —thought himself a much more dignified person than either of us, especially than poor Jamie, who, as yet, knew nothing of business.

And then we set off without delay—my imagination having by this time most vividly realized to me my mother's bread and butter—on our farther way home, where arriving, out of the darkness and chill of the solitary road into all the warmth and genial light of this sanctuary of comfort and tenderness, with the aforesaid bread and butter visible on the table, and the kettle audible by the brilliant fire, the water came into my dazzled eyes as it comes now at the remembrance. The room looks chill and cold as I look round upon it, and remember how it was thirty years ago. Even so; for my mother will never

shed kindliness and blessing out of her gentle hand at a mortal fireside, and I can never more be a boy.

I was seated in my father's arm-chair on one particular Saturday, with a greatly-diminished loaf beside my plate, and my appetite not half exhausted. My mother, opposite me, knitted a stocking—her favourite occupation when light failed for her more elaborate sewing—a cup of tea, which she took in compliment to my late meal, stood before her, and now and then she paused to listen for my father's heavy footstep, sounding upon the fallen leaves which encumbered all the roads without. Jamie, already over head and ears in a novel I had brought out with me, lay half-sitting, half-reclining upon the rug at my mother's feet, reading by the firelight, for we had only one candle on the table. Perhaps I did not much notice then the details of this home scene, yet it is marvel-

lous how clearly they have returned upon me many a day since. My mother's brown gown making a warm background for that frank, boyish head of Jamie's, with its clustering brown hair, among which the light found out, here and there, a lingering thread of the child's golden locks. One of his cheeks flushed a little with the fire, the other leaning upon the tanned hand, not without marks of cuts and wounds bygone, which was separated from his jacket sleeve by a greater space than seemed altogether needful; the book rested on one knee, and embraced by one loving arm; the dark eyes just visible under the downcast lashes; the absorbed face—Our Jamie! Heaven knows if you had trouble in this world, you had your full share of love.

And my mother's face, with its clear colour and fair broad forehead—with its close net cap, and brown hair just threaded with silver; and myself with my much news,

my mixture of shyness and self-importance, my bread and butter; and round us, like a frame, the shadowed corners of the room, almost dark, where little Mary used to play, the closed windows, the unpapered walls, with their faint green water-colour, and low roof—perhaps it is impossible to fancy now how pleasant this room looked then.

"Willie," said my mother, "what are we to do with this great laddie here? He has got all he's likely to get at the school, and that might have been a very good education for folk of our means if he had taken pains; but I suppose he's like other boys. And, Willie my man, Jamie's fifteen come Whit Sunday."

"And I've been nine months at the office," said I, "and only a year and a half older than Jamie. I'll speak to Mr. Spender, mother, and try to get him a place in Edinburgh; and he could live in Mrs. Cockburn's with me."

"Ay, but, laddies, you never think how the means are to be got," said my mother, shaking her head, as Jamie, whose faculties permitted reading and listening to be carried on at the same time, looked up briskly, to nod to me in entire approval of my scheme. "And where is the siller to come from, Willie? Ten shillings a-week to Mrs. Cockburn for you, and ten shillings for Jamie, would be hard gathering; for ten shillings a-week is five-and-twenty pounds a-year, and twice that is fifty, which would only leave fifty over to keep the house going and cleed us all."

"Ay, mother," said I, "but I'm to have twenty pounds this year and Jamie would be sure to have ten; so it would not be so hard after all. And I never have my best jacket on but on Sabbath-day."

"You see, Willie, these masters of yours are but laddies themselves," said my considerate mother; "and Mr. Bell was telling

me that there was never such a thing heard tell of, as a boy like you getting twenty pounds the first year. To be sure, I told him you had actually got five of it, and that it had been a great help. But you see they might draw back still. It would be cannier, there is no doubt, to bind Jamie to some decent man like Mr. Bell—Andrew's as well off as he can be—where he could be boarded and learn his business at the same time."

A great impatient heave of Jamie's bent head and shoulders, showed me very clearly how unpalatable this was to him; so I persevered in my scheme with sympathy, recollecting how little I had relished such an intended disposal of myself.

"A shop's never like an office, mother," said I, oracularly. "Anybody may learn to be a shopman; but then clerks, when they're clever, get to be merchants, and—maybe merchants are not all what you

call rich—but they're far liker gentlemen, mother."

"The laddie's daft!" said my mother, with some impatience. "I want Jamie to be a decent, honest man, making creditable bread, and indebted to naebody; and if I ken by myself what the cares of a small income are, and would be glad to put my bairns above them, what kind of comfort is it to me, to be told that this thing or the other thing is liker a gentleman? No doubt it is true," continued the same kindly voice, softening considerably, "that you have never been treated like common folk's bairns, neither out bye nor at home; but I can tell you it's no such easy thing as you laddies think, to keep a good appearance and a plentiful house—though I am thankful we have aye done it—on an income like your father's. And there's Andrew, you see, will be getting a shop of his ain, and turning a prosperous man, before we ken where we are."

"When I'm twenty," said I, rather hotly, "I may be in business as well as Mr. Sellar and Mr. Spender, and I would rather have an office and clerks, and do all my business with my head and my pen, than sell tea and sugar every day to all the fishwives in Moulisburgh."

"Eh, mother, so would I!" ejaculated Jamie.

"Hold your peace," said my mother, "and let me never hear the like of this again, Willie. *I'll* be well content to see the fishwives in Andrew's ain shop, and I'm just as proud for my bairns as most folk; but something must be done about Jamie, and if you get a good opportunity you may speak to Mr. Spender. He looks a sensible lad, and maybe has more prudence than the other one. You may mention it on Monday, Willie, and we'll see what can be done."

Prudence—but I knew Mr. Spender was

as wise an adviser as anybody could have, and always remarkably prudent and clear-headed when he had other people's affairs to manage—so I said nothing to the general question. Just then, too, my father's heavy foot did make itself audible crushing upon the fallen leaves, and I hastily abdicated my throne, and took up a humbler seat. My father was very well content with the first stage for Jamie's settlement, and fully confirmed my mother's commission; and as for Jamie himself, he was rich beyond calculation and had glorious schooners sailing out of Leith, before the cold dawn of the winter's Sabbath put an end to his triumphant dreams.

CHAPTER V.

It was with unusual feelings of self-importance, and a degree of state and gravity which nobody quite understood, that I looked forward to my interview, on Monday morning, with Mr. Spender. The little pleasant bustle of the early Sabbath, with its careful toilette, and simple preparations, found me greatly absorbed in deep and solemn thought, blank and unresponsive to all the tricks of Jamie, who was not in quite so serious a frame of mind as my mother thought

becoming. The parlour, bright with wintry sunshine, the clear fire and pleasant breakfast-table, the snowy table-cloth, fresh from its folds, and fragrant with the fresh air in which it had been dried, and the hundred little comforts attendant on a breakfast at home, which your boy, be he schoolboy or incipient merchant, never finds elsewhere, recalled me out of my grand imaginary dialogues into the present enjoyment that lay before me. The delicate little "rizzored haddie," the pot of this year's honey, or choice of less luscious jellies—not to speak of my beloved bread and butter, and an appetite which needed no artificial excitement—and, better than all, the family intercourse, frank and kindly, soon charmed me out of my speculations.

Then we set out together to church, my mother proudly taking the arm which I was now tall enough to give, and my father and Jamie walking on before. The morning

was frosty and sunny—a hale, clear day like kindly age — with crisp hoar-frost whitening the grass, and patches of snow visible upon the summit of Arthur's seat; and pleasantly the bells rang out into the distinct air which did full justice to their every tone. Our road, quiet as it usually was, looked by no means unfrequented to-day. There were families of decent neighbours before us, families overtaking us at every step, and among them we passed on very soberly and happily with our Sabbath faces and our Sabbath apparel, an undivided family, too.

Andrew already sat in the little pew in the church when we entered it, and Andrew returned with us to dinner, and remained at home for all the rest of the Sabbath-day. This was one disadvantage of the shopkeeping life which I did not fail carefully to point out to my mother; for Andrew could not come home on Saturday, as I did, by reason of the late hour to which

even Mr. Robert Bell—respectable Seceder as he was—kept his shop open on the last evening of the week.

Andrew, though he began to grow a very sedate person, and had a composed pragmaticalness about him which was the source of a hundred little disputes among us, was still very glad to be at home; only a certain Miss Christina, newly returned from a boarding-school, Mr. Robert Bell's only daughter, bulked so very largely in his speech, that Jamie and I, after a few laughs and rallyings, betook ourselves to other occupations, not relishing this waste of our valuable time in conversation about "a lassie." But we forgot our superiority both of us, when, just before tea-time, the parlour door opened gently, and a girl of Jamie's own age came in with a little timidity. She had a round face, very clear in its complexion, pretty light brown hair, and sensible, unembarrassed eyes. With

nothing in the least resembling one of my heroines, there was a womanly order and propriety about this neat little person which struck me immediately, boy as I was. She was younger than I—yet I recognised the helpful, friendly woman, at once my superior and my elder, while I looked at this little girl, blushing before me and half afraid of Jamie Mitchell's big brother.

This was Mary Burnet. I had heard of her before, but this was the first time her name became a living personality to me. Since then, through years of long absence and the most utter separation, it has never ceased, for good or evil, to work on me like a charm.

Mary was the only child of an old schoolmate of my mother's, dead a few years before, and only within three months had her father—a disreputable doctor, clever and reckless—established himself in the neighbourhood of Ailieford. The motherless

Mary, left to herself whole days and nights, had learned to come about our house like one to the manner born; but Saturday nights and Sabbath mornings were her father's resting times—and so it happened that I had not seen her before. She went forward, and whispered to my mother something half-apologetic about her father having gone out, and the dreariness of being alone on Sabbath-day; and my mother answered by loosing the strings of her bonnet, and sending her into the east room to take off "her things."

These "things" being taken off, Mary had a chair set for her beside my mother's at the tea-table, and immediately there fell a hush upon all of us, from Andrew downward. Then Jamie laughed aloud a great embarrassed laugh. We all joined him, and the ice was broken.

Mary was no great talker, and what she did say, I am constrained to confess,

bordered on the matter-of-fact. There was speculation—or rather there was clear, honest, sensible thoughtfulness in the brown eyes which she raised so attentively to the face of every speaker; but there was little speculation in Mary's talk. I myself, being what is called a very romantic boy, and just approaching the high-flown and pathetical age, had a very different ideal in my imagination of the sort of person whom I might fall in love with; but Mary's quiet voice and eyes, nay, even her little confidential details of housekeeping, which were revealed in an under tone to my mother, kept hold of my memory strangely, and it must be remembered that I was now half-way to my seventeenth birthday.

But Monday morning came, and with it—at dark seven o'clock, cold and dreary, a wind blowing high without, and everything very snug and comfortable within, where I lay sound asleep—came my mother, half-

dressed, to wake me. There was no possibility of another half-hour—for I knew, by long experience, that "Willie, are you waking?" would come in again upon me in five minutes, nor leave me till I was visibly astir. Grumbling Jamie, by my side, did not move till threatened with cold water; and dressing hurriedly by the light of the candle, which looked as cold as we did, we ran down-stairs to the fire, which already burned clearly in the parlour. There my mother, looking quite comfortable and cosy with her shawl over her morning-gown, made for us the tea breakfast, which elevated me so far above Mrs. Cockburn's matutinal "parritch;" and then, with one of Marget's famous scones in my pocket, with my great-coat buttoned, and my comforter donned, and Jamie drowned in the camlet cloak which had once been Andrew's, we set out. Andrew, who had only half the distance to walk, did not choose to begin

quite so soon, so we, the younger brothers, set off together.

"And I say, Willie, I was aye guid at the counting," said Jamie. "You can tell them that; but I'm no gaun to serve a shop in a white apron, like Andrew. Man, what a crusty chap Andrew's turned! He would cast out with my mother if he daured!"

"But, Jamie, mind it's longer than school-time," said I, with great gravity, "and no making faces at the maister, nor drawing pictures of him, nor whispering to Tam Mouter across the form; but you'll have to be regular to the hour, Jamie, and work, and never try to play till you get out of the office."

"I thought you said you read your book in the office yesterday, Willie?" said my observant brother.

"So I do," said I, with solemnity; "for Mr. Spender is a great man for improving

the mind; but it would never do to be idle, and you'll have to mind that, Jamie."

To which advice, Jamie only made answer by some laughter so hearty, exultant and irrestrainable, that I myself, in all my self-importance and gravity, was constrained to join him; and as this happened just as we reached the bridge of Moulisburgh, we parted, and went upon our several ways.

But the result of my conversation with Mr. Spender was a very good-humoured interest and active exertion in Jamie's behalf on the part of my young employer. Mr. Spender was just about to be married, and was in the highest spirits possible, full of the most expansive sunshine. So my juvenile anxieties about my brother's settlement were speedily transferred to his shoulders; and relying on him with perfect confidence, I already believed undoubtingly that Jamie's fortune was secured.

"I am afraid, William," said Mr.

Spender, a few days after, "that I am likely to find nothing better for your brother just now than a place in Clerk and Fleck's. They are not people to my liking; but if he were once in Edinburgh, you know, and we had time to look about us, we might find him a better place. You know Clerk and Fleck's, wholesale provision people. He'll get little leisure, poor fellow! but plenty insight; and Donald Clerk is to call here to-day, Willie. You can hear what he says yourself."

It is true I was not quite elated at the prospect of seeing Jamie under the hands of Donald Clerk, but to have achieved a success was something. Donald Clerk was a great Aberdonian, a mountain of bone and muscle, with grizzled red hair, and rugged prominent features, and slow and pompous speech; a man of hard and calculating sagacity, reported to be penurious and miserly, and from whom nobody got even a scanty day's

wages without a plentiful day's work. But one always feels one's own case an exception to all other possible cases. I would have shaken my head in most wise deprecation of any one else accepting such a place, yet, somehow, I felt a conviction that these disagreeables would melt and disappear before Jamie. The master who had been gentle to no other, must of necessity be good to him—so Donald Clerk, when he came, found me greatly more willing to devote my brother to his service, than I had been on Mr. Spender's first mention of him. I felt within myself a certain dignity. I was giving this rude person an opportunity of redeeming himself—another trial—and this idea made me calm and superior, quite beyond the reach of any roughness of his.

"I want a laddie that has heart for his work," said Donald, "no such diversion in my place, youngster, as ye'll get here. I have to put to my ain hands without pride or

drawback, and any callant I get must e'en do the same. I give him ten pound the first year, and if he shews birr, maybe fifteen the second, and good usage, and just as much time to himsel as he can save off his own work—more than I get, it maybe, if the laddie is worth his lugs—and if all that suits your brother, and your master here gives him a recommendation, and he can write a creditable hand, it's a' one to me who I get. He'll just do as good as another."

Thus graciously permitted, I brought in the excited Jamie with me on the following Monday. That day was a long holiday. On the next my mother herself came in by the coach, and settled the matter with Donald and Mrs. Cockburn, so that on the Wednesday morning I left Jamie set down, somewhat bewildered, among the hams and cheeses, the barrels of finnan haddies and pickled beef, which made odorous the premises of Messrs. Clerk and Fleck, and

went on myself to my own lighter and more accustomed labour, secure of a companion now to my morning's "parritch" and my evening's tea, my little bed-closet, and my weekly journey home, and in consequence very much elated and light of heart.

CHAPTER VI.

AFTER the first weeks novelty was over, Jamie began to have anything but an admiration of his work and his master; but fortunately we had not been trained to utter intolerance of the disagreeable, and except in the irrepressible grumble, and sometimes in a little half malicious half good-humoured mimicry, with the clearest apprehension and enjoyment of all the grotesque points in the character of Donald Clerk, Jamie contented himself to endure what, to our disciplined and obedient minds, took the form of an

institution and necessity. My mother condoled with him too when he made his complaints at home; but Jamie had made his first step in the world, had "got a situation," and that step was not to be lightly withdrawn. True, poor Jamie sighed a sigh of envy when he saw me reading in the office, and was half inclined to grow sulky like Geordie Cockburn, when he found at what a rapid rate I got through novel after novel; but Jamie captured the dingy volumes to Geordie's great content, and afterwards we read in unity, with greater enjoyment—for I, softening and growing generous, gave up a little of my selfish enjoyment too.

And by-and-bye as my gay, happy-tempered brother grew a little older, and a little more master of himself, he gathered a knot of friends round him, such as I had never known; and Jamie ceased to keep to the regular tea hour of Mrs. Cockburn, and now not unfrequently had his little jug and

plate of bread and butter put aside for him as his comrade, Tom, Mrs. Cockburn's son, had very often. If I, in my dignity of elder brother, found fault with this, it was but very seldom, for I was still held captive under the influence of the Ethelinds and Elfridas, and had no apprehension for Jamie.

And still at Messrs. Sellar and Spender's we went on in our headlong race with fortune—now all but lost, now gaining a little start, and shooting off with fresh vigour in advance. Mr. Spender's marriage, I do not quite know why, was delayed from time to time, and Mr. Spender himself grew a little restless and irritable in consequence. I suppose prudent father or uncle waited to see the stability of the young business, which still to sober eyes—though sober eyes did not guess half the truth—looked more an adventure than anything substantial, or to be relied on. What the young lady herself might think I cannot tell; but certainly Mr.

Spender was very impatient, and considerably chafed and irritated by the perpetual delay.

Mr. Sellar went on in his usual festive activity—doing a great deal of business for us after his fashion, and making a greater amount of bad debts than we had ever possessed before, while Mathew Strang drank porter with devotion in the cellar, and I read novels in the office. All of us in our own sphere, and, according to our opportunities, doing all we could to facilitate the crash which Mr. Spender sometimes realized for an instant, with great drops standing on his brow, but the next moment forgot again as placidly as ever.

But one day the often-recurring crisis could not be managed so easily as usual. The money to be found "somewhere" to pay that impending bill, which has only now an hour of its course to run, was nowhere attainable. Another came to-morrow—after that it is impossible to guess how many

others on the next to-morrow—and so after hours of frantic chase and anxiety, which wore deep furrows into Mr. Spender's brow, time and the hour brought us the end.

Alas for Mathew Strang, debarred now from all gratuitous porter, and remembering mournfully the five bairns in the Cowgate Close! Alas for me, who have no inheritance in this office-desk, endeared though it is by all the memories of all the fair imaginations with which I have grown acquainted there! Alas for Dour Peter, now about to be purchased by Donald Clerk, who must bid farewell for ever to all the luxuries and amusements of his wandering life! and the two poor, young, rash masters of us all—what is to become of them?

Mr. Sellar will become a "traveller"—a commercial traveller—for some greater merchant, and, pursuing the life he has learned to love, will pass through many a vicissitude —many an alternation of reckless mirth and

blank despondency—of imprudence and improvement, temperance and wild abandon—till he reaches the darker end yonder, which no one now sees looming on his way. Mr. Spender will have to give up his first love, and will do it with a heartache, yet bravely, and like a man; and by-and-bye the sky will break out again under the clouds, and there will be a new course for him, though he too can never lose the tinge of reckless daring which he carries away from this; and so he will go on in a less disastrous because a purer way than his partner, and will rise while the other falls, but will never altogether cure himself of the evils of his beginning.

As for me, I shed tears for them, when it was dark, and no one could see me; and felt that I never should forget the look of impatient despair with which the more intellectual partner—my own kind friend and patron—submitted to be worsted; but worsted they were, beyond redemption, and very speedily

both had disappeared to take refuge with their friends; and their little world closed up over them, and knew them no more.

For myself I followed their example—went home for a few days, and was rather distinguished as a kind of innocent martyr by my mother. "Poor laddie!" she called me, and I felt it a very substantial distinction to be unfortunate.

But by this time I was approaching eighteen, and had become an experienced person, fully entitled to my twenty, if not to the magnificence of five-and-twenty pounds a-year; and I had not spent above a fortnight at home, nor told Mary Burnet more than some five score stories, when I returned to Edinburgh to resume my occupation as clerk to the respectable, substantial Mr. Robert Middleton, an easy man, who conducted his business in a style of quiet plentifulness, as his wife conducted his house. I was very fortunate, so far as my connection with this

small merchant class went; my new master was a capital specimen of the limited, yet liberal, hospitable, narrow-minded, cheery, kindly citizen of Edinburgh—a man full of small prejudices and cautiousness, entirely contracted within his town, which was the world to him, and a vast one, yet nevertheless a man quite worthy of the unusual good repute which he enjoyed.

But I lost my library—lost my novels—and lost my time during the day for reading them. It had come to be quite necessary for me this change; for after all my fare was not the wholesomest in the world, and I began to be rather more than satisfied with the length of my diet. I took to improving myself—a new fit—and even to amusing myself sometimes strolling about the gay streets with Jamie, and other companions more like my own age than Jamie. These Edinburgh streets, crowded with idlers, are remarkable in their way—so many people go

there—not to firesides or domestic chambers, nor even to the coffee-house or tavern, which is the frequent conclusion of such walks, but there to the pavement, with its lighted shops and little animated crowds, to seek their pleasure; so that you have a sort of impression that the town has been turned out of doors. Thriftless people are many of these loungers in their small, limited way, and infinite grades of "society," and "the world," each holding itself proudly apart from the lower circle, which it defines so clearly, exist in that community, which goes and comes through Princes Street. Workmen of the petty arts, which gather about such towns as Edinburgh—workers in gold and silver, and all the ornamental trades born of wealth and idleness—take their evening promenade upon the busy "plainstanes," more self-important by far than the great people for whom they labour—great people who in their turn are small and self-important too;

and you may predict of every man you meet, whatever his external guise or visible "rank," that he has an all-powerful world—a society which sways his very thoughts with its arbitrary fashions and customs, and a public opinion, before whose faintest censure he would tremble, as distinct and important as the *beau monde*—the great world which thinks itself the one and only existence bearing that universal name.

I myself, I fancy, must have been born a loiterer—certain it is that the place I have constantly fallen into in this world is that of one who waits and looks on—a sort of supernumerary and unneeded spectator, noticing unconsciously and involuntarily what others do, and doing but very little for myself. I should have said this with some bitterness had I been twenty years younger; but I have long since accepted, without grumbling, the fate which I acknowledge best and most suitable for me.

Heaven knows, Jamie—blythest, kindliest, most hapless brother—that I was no spy on you; though, many times, love high and noble has taken this meanness on itself, and dared to be a very spy for the sake of one in peril!

But bits of observation came to me unawares as I lounged along these merry Edinburgh streets, through which I myself passed in a dream, most usually only half-acquainted with my companions' plans or intentions. I did not attend to them, but I heard what they said, and understood it: and wakening up now and then, took my part in it, to their great astonishment, for they thought me more abstracted than I really was—or rather they were ignorant of the family faculty which gave to Jamie full power of reading and listening, or, in an emergency, of receiving the benefit of two novels at once.

CHAPTER VII.

As a clerk in Mr. Robert Middleton's, I completed my one-and-twentieth year; and Jamie, now rapidly approaching the dignified elevation of twenty, remained still under the domination of Donald Clerk—Donald Clerk, much ridiculed, mimicked, grumbled at; and giving good cause for all. Nevertheless, he was Jamie's master still.

On the eve of my twenty-first birth-day, Jamie and I, carrying with us a parcel made up in brown paper, took our way home to Ailieford. It was Friday night,

and the next day was to be an entire holiday, granted very willingly, with many jokes and congratulations, by my employer, and with a grudge by Jamie's. We were in considerable spirits, laughing more than usual, and slightly fluttered, for the feast we went home to keep, was not a celebration of my coming of age, but a very much more important event—my birth-day was the day of Andrew's marriage.

We, his younger brothers, did not well know how to take this immense change and separation. We were fluttered, excited—blushed and laughed, and looked foolish—and had a considerable perception that Andrew, who had long put on surly looks when we called him Dandie, and rejected somewhat sullenly the boyish diminutives and affectionate nicknames of which we all bore a dozen, was quite a distinct and independent person now, and belonged to our little household no more. The boy, it is

true, is very prone to say "I"—but the first real break in the "us" of his home is a shock and trial to him, no less than to elder hearts.

Andrew was to be married. I myself received the intelligence with a shout of incredulous laughter, which, however, gradually sunk into a half-whimpering quaver, when my mother's grave and half-offended face convinced me that this startling news was true. My mother said it was a great match for Andrew, that it would set him up for life, that there was now little cause of anxiety for him; but while she spoke these words of satisfaction, there was a cloud on her face, which, to us, belied her speech. "She is a nice lassie—a very nice lassie—Christina Bell," said my mother, repeating the words as if to assure herself; "and nobody could be so much beside her as Andrew has been, without something coming of the friendship."

My dear, doubtful, anxious mother! it was in vain that she tried to re-assure herself. She knew very well in her inmost heart, with that bitter clear-sightedness which love gives, that poor, young, gay Christina got no justice from Andrew; and that, "nice lassie" as she really was, it was her father's shop, far more than her own fresh face and simple character which made Andrew seek his master's daughter.

However, it was all settled, and they were to be married; and Christina, only eighteen, to whom it was all a capital frolic, and whose heart, perhaps, was as little engaged as my prudent brother's, went about as gay as a bird all day long, full of laughter, and importance, and preparations, very much aware of the honour and glory of being married so young, and feeling to the full her own consequence as a bride. All her friends sat in committee upon every article of the great wardrobe with which her own caprice and

her father's indulgence supplied her. Everybody in Moulisburgh knew what her wedding-dress was to be, and who were the bride's-maids, and the very shape, and form, and encircling flourishes of the great C B. on Christina's silver spoons. Her bride cake was ordered in Edinburgh—she was invited out as the special guest of a gay party every night; and I believe few brides, be they as devotedly in love as my old heroine Ethelind, ever passed so easily and gaily over the period of bridehood as merry little Christina Bell, who was not in love at all.

On this Friday, 23rd of November, we walked out smartly through a damp drizzle of rain, to Moulisburgh. Andrew was not visible to-night in the shop, but through a lighted and only half-curtained window above, we had a glimpse of Christina's gay face and light little figure, dancing about in the resplendent silk gown which was to make its state appearance to-morrow. Poor little,

thoughtless, inconsiderate girl! she was rehearsing her part, and doing it with so much fun and laughter, and clapping of hands, that we puzzled, excited lads in the street could not but laugh, too, with sympathy. A decent woman close by us, with her clean cotton gown tucked up, and the hood of her cloth cloak over her head, who was picking her steps across the muddy street, paused for a moment, attracted by our laughter and by the light above. "Eh, pity me!" said our fellow-spectator, as she tucked up her gown with emphasis, and passed on; "the like of that puir silly bairn taking a married woman's vows upon her, and adventuring to be a man's wife! Pity me!"

Jamie gave a vigorous push to my arm, and we went on; but we did not make any communication to each other of the vague thoughts with which her speech inspired us. After all, it was not Christina we were inte-

rested in—it was our brother, and this first pulling off of a branch from our household tree, to be planted and take root for itself in other soil.

The trees, with faint feeble leaves fluttering here and there at the end of a bough, waved their naked arms over the roof of our little house, with a monotonous melancholy sound, like a chant of indiscernible words. The few cottages in the neighbourhood, unseen themselves in the air, which was heavy and dark with a mist of falling rain, threw out a little circle of ruddy light upon the glistening wet road before them; and we could see as we ascended the brae, through the bare branches of the lilacs, the welcome of my mother's fire. The fallen leaves on the road-side, clogged in a mass by the day's rain, did not betray our footsteps; and we stole close up to the parlour window to look in, before we made our arrival known at the kitchen door.

Andrew sat in my father's chair by the fireside, with one arm resting on the table, and one hand now and then passed hurriedly over his face. Andrew was red and shame-faced, and we could see his brow curve and his look grow sulky, as he glanced up uneasily to meet my mother's eye. But the sullenness and the anger were both assumed, to hide the confusion of which Andrew was ashamed—we could be very sure of that.

My mother, in her usual place opposite him, was "making up" a cap, just a little gayer than usual for the great event of to-morrow; and over the back of a chair at the fire hung some collars and cuffs, and other little articles of feminine decoration, preparatory for the same. But between me and the light of the fire which made a background for her face, turning its clear outline and round soft cheek towards us, Mary Burnet, employed in a similar way to my mother, sat at the table, looking now and then with a

smile and a blush, half of fun, half sympathy, towards Andrew, and pausing sometimes, as I thought, to listen for the sound of our coming footsteps on the road without.

"Have you brought out your new coat, Willie?" said my mother, as we laid down our brown paper parcel. "I have just been looking at Andrew's; it is very well for him, that's a bridegroom, but I am sure, laddies, blue coats will be wasteful things for you."

By this time we had opened our burden; and there indeed were a couple of resplendent blue coats with gilt buttons shining in the firelight.

"And so kenspeckle," said my mother, with a sigh, "everybody will ken till they're done that you got them for your brother's wedding."

Andrew winced—he always did at every mention of the embarrassing event which we all looked forward to; and Andrew's shyness had little grace in it. The curved brow

and shrugged shoulder of impatience did not much incline us to spare him.

"And your frock's blue too, Mary, my dear," said my mother. "If you'll make the tea for the laddies, I'll plet up your ruff. You can lift back the chair with the ironed things, and just lay them into my room; and there's my new ribbons that Andrew brought me lying on the drawers; and just see if Marget's done with the shirts, Mary—when they're ironed in candlelight they're aye spoiled. Willie, like a man, cut the bread yourself; and take you off your new coat, Jamie, and sit down—for Andrew's things are a' to be got ready and packed up, you see, to go to his own house; and however long folk have to prepare, there's aye a hurry at the end."

From my mother's manifold businesses, and our own state of confused mirth and excitement, it was a relief to look upon the clear unembarrassed face of Mary Burnet.

Brown eyes which met you frankly, clear of all mists of dreaming, a smile which went and came, a complexion warm and pure, a manner full of the sweet unconscious self-possession which was never aware of self at all. I do not know, unless by the very force and strength of dissimilarity, how it came about that so thoroughly sensible and practical a person as Mary Burnet should have come to be my ideal. Yet so it was—out of all my mists and speculations, my passive observation of others, my vague and versatile doings for myself, it was like a sudden translation to the clear open daylight—the assured home soil under my feet, the candid sky above, to enter the unclouded atmosphere which Mary Burnet spread around her. Her presence brought me down out of the clouds, out of the vague aspirations of a young mind knowing nothing of the world. I could not make a fairy princess of Mary; her clear honest eyes restrained my soarings—she drew

me to her level—I could not carry her to mine.

And hers was the standing-ground of reality, distinct and palpable; life limited, you may say, in its extent, and narrow in its enjoyments. Yet a life thoroughly *lived*, made up of reckoned and visible hours, not to be dreamed away, but worked with, each one in its own appointed course and time. An evil spirit was in poor Mary's home—a demon, daily gathering power, and dragging her sole friend, her father, nearer to the grave of good fame and fortune and life itself, every day. And at the door, *Want*, like an armed man, stood waiting for the full entrance which the other prepared for him. Real trial, real misery, were brought very near to Mary; and feeling their breath upon her cheek, and fighting with all her woman's might to defend her little citadel against them, she was little likely, being of such a spirit as she was, to waste her time on imaginary pleasures.

But just now Mary goes about the room with her light step, bringing out cups for us, and arranging the table. All to save Marget in the kitchen, who is still busy with Andrew's linen—the new stock, which my mother, with a little pride, will not have delayed in her house a single day after he has attained his own. Andrew, very glum, remains in the corner. Poor fellow! his face grows grey under the shadow of his hand, when it is not hot with a flush of burning crimson; and when we speak to him he answers gruffly, or twitches about uneasily in his chair; for Andrew, though he is a little proud of himself, his bride, and his important position, is dreadfully confused and "thinks shame," having yet, though he is three-and-twenty and a bridegroom, not a little of his boyish awkwardness remaining with him still.

Jamie, now a young man of twenty, best dressed, best looking, and gayest of the family, with his bright hazel eyes and abun-

dant hair, takes up the conversation and carries it on briskly. Jamie does not quite admire the fondness with which my mother pauses, as she passes behind his chair, to draw back the heavy curls from his forehead, and draw her hand across the open, manly young brow; but he submits with a blush, a frown and a smile, and goes on without a pause.

I myself, laboriously cutting bread and butter, am inclined to silence. If you can fancy the gay light and sparkle taken out of Jamie's eyes, my grey ones are like them, and I have hair of an indefinite dusty tint which my mother calls dark-fair, and not much to speak of in the way of complexion —very little like a hero, you conclude—it is true; and Mary Burnet making tea, whom I do not worship, but heartily love, is no heroine at all.

There is no enchantment in my first love —it lifts me out of the gardens of Paradise,

and sets me down in a home. I cannot make romances for Mary, or dream of sharing unheard-of solitudes or toils and dangers with her, as I did when my beloved was a pure abstraction and dream. The walls of local habitation rear themselves about her, even to my flying fancy, and the fireside light it is which shines in her frank eyes. Sitting at the head of our little table, filling these fragrant cups for us, in her close-fitting winter gown and little apron, with her thimble on her finger, and her needle just visible by means of its white thread secured in the band of her waist, Mary is just where she should be—entirely in her sphere; and I, overbrimming with the romance of one-and-twenty, am yet contented with the natural fitness, and feel that it should be so.

CHAPTER VIII.

"MANY good birthdays to you, Willie, my man," said my mother, as she entered the little room where sleepy Jamie still lay wrapt in a morning dream, while I, standing before the glass, contemplated my blue coat and white waistcoat with silent satisfaction. My good mother was half-way between smiles and tears, inclining fully most to the latter. "Many good birthdays, Willie; and for anything I ken you may be a bridegroom yourself before this day twelvemonths, as Andrew is now."

My mother's hand stole up to her eye; she thought I did not perceive it.

"No fear," said I, though a mighty flush came over my face, and I saw Mary Burnet in my glass as clearly as ever I saw her at my mother's tea-table.

"But you need not put on your good things at this time in the morning, Willie," said my mother; "*it's* not to be till four o'clock in the day; and Andrew is not up yet, any more than Jamie, and your father is out at his business. Put on your old coat like a man, and come down the stair. I have something to say to you, Willie, and you'll get a cup of tea."

So I changed my coat, shook up not over gently the grumbling Jamie, and accepted my mother's invitation.

The breakfast-table was very carefully arranged, and there were tokens in all parts of the room of this great crisis in our family life. Andrew's books—the few he had got

as presents and prizes when a boy, and the other few he had added to our household stores since then—lay on a little table, tied up and ready to depart. Andrew's umbrella —the famous silk umbrella which none of us dared venture to borrow—stood in a corner in its glazed case. My mother, sitting by the window, was trimming the cap she made up last night with Andrew's ribbon, and on a chair beside her, wrapt in silver paper, lay a parcel of white gloves. The house was hushed and quiet, more so than usual, even on a Sabbath morning, for Marget in the kitchen hung with solemn abstraction over the last shirt—the fine linen shirt, spun by my mother's own hands long ago, and newly-made for her first-born son, which Marget had not ventured to lay hands upon in the ineffectual candlelight.

"Was Mr. Middleton willing to let you away, Willie?" said my mother, as we sat down quietly to the table for our preliminary

cup of tea. "I wish Jamie and you could both get into one office. He's a wild, blythe laddie, and just coming to the worst time. Do you aye see where he is at night, Willie?"

"Oh! Jamie has hosts of friends," said I, "and besides, he's often late at the warehouse. I think he always tells me where he goes—except sometimes; but if he should have à sweetheart, mother—"

"Whisht!" said my mother, with a slightly peremptory tone. "I have no ground to be feared that's true, but anxious folk are aye fearing; and it was just that Dr. Burnet, Mary's father, was telling your father the other day about meeting Jamie in Edinburgh. See to him, Willie, like a man. I could bear misfortune for you well enough, but I could ill bear to see a son of mine turning out a wreck like that puir reprobate doctor. Mary has a sair handful with him, Willie;

poor thing! I would be thankful to see her in a house of her own."

Nothing said I, suddenly feeling myself bound to my chair as to a stake, and unable to interpose any screen between my burning, agitated face and my mother's keen, observant eyes.

"And a good wife she would make," said my mother, meditatively; "and a help and no burden upon whatever man was wise enough to seek her. Weel, Willie, I'm no advocate for young marriages; nor for marriages at all indeed, unless folk have a clear vocation, and need a wife, or need a man—but Mary Burnet's the kind of wife to help a steady lad up the brae, and to be a comfort to baith him and his kin."

Still I could answer nothing — it was impossible to respond, unprepared and unarmed as I was, to this point blank and steady volley.

But just then, sounds overhead of the

awakened sleeper's toilette, and the heavy step of my father without, roused us, and my mother hastened to carry away the cups, and restore the perfect order of the table, while I sat down on her seat by the window, to get quit of my blushes as I best could, and to twist her spotless white ribbon round my finger, and think of Mary Burnet.

Mary Burnet! already in my mother's anticipation my wife. My wife! I could not bear the distinct magnitude of this idea. I rose hurriedly, and went out, carrying in my mind, along with the one clear thought, which possessed it suddenly like the daylight, a confused apprehension of my mother's white ribbons and the gloves of the bridal party. But I had scarcely room to breathe under this first overpowering impression—my wife!

The air was fresh with moisture still, and came on my cheek with a little force new travelled from the sea; and through a

floating multitude of white rain-clouds, the sun and the blue sky looked down brightly, with warm salutations, to the brightened, glistening earth. Drops of rain were glittering high up upon the faint leaves at the tree-tops, which you scarcely thought could support themselves, much less these little worlds of light; and the red-breast chirped at Marget's kitchen window, and the voices of cottage children bound for school came pleasantly from the road. I walked a hundred yards from the door with great rapidity, and returned again, gasping, and taking long draughts of the fresh air, which surrounded me, all glowing with sunshine, like silent laughter. Then I went to study very intently the bare wands of the white rose-tree budded already for the spring leaves. I remember them very well how they looked—the brown husk folding its protection around the young, perfect, colourless germ which should yet wave in summer

winds, and under summer light, and how myself then was budded—full of many a promise which neither sun nor rain has sufficed to bring through.

The marriage—not your English marriage, with canonical hours and sacred places to be considered, my good friend, but our sober Scottish ceremony, in which there is nothing important but the convenience and good pleasure of minister, bridegroom and bride—did not take place till the afternoon. Then we found Mr. Robert Bell's great, dark-coloured dining-room full of guests. The long dining-table already spread—for there was no drawing-room in the dwelling-place of Mr. Robert Bell—divided into two lines the array of company placed on chairs and benches on either side; and upon the black haircloth sofa at the upper end, where there was a small table set out in the centre of a vacant space with Mr. Bell's great family Bible upon it, the good man himself,

the minister and the minister's wife, sat lovingly side by side. To still another vacant place of honour on this capacious sofa, my mother was advanced, and we, as the body-guards of the bridegroom, had seats found for us, with a little trouble, as near this simple dais as we could be placed.

And then the little thoughtless bride, blushing and drooping her head, made her appearance, conducted by Miss Bell, her aunt, the principal dressmaker of Moulisburgh. Christina had a little more than the average good looks, and the immediate crisis took away all her levity. I noticed then, I think for the first time, the universal womanish sympathy which brought tears to the eyes of some, and gave a wistful affectionateness to the looks of all. "Poor thing—poor young thing!" said the matrons, who had already passed through the ordeal, on the threshold of which little Christina faltered; and though her girl companions laughed, they did

it tremblingly, and grouped about her with an instinctive protection which moved me much. There were few in my neighbourhood disposed to share in my sympathy, but I can never see without respect any of these great involuntary, unconscious *sentiments* of common nature.

Just then I was in no mood for making reflections. I do it at my ease now, looking back and lingering; but then I stood by Mary Burnet's side—as close to her as Andrew was to his bride—looking on while the mysterious bond was tied, and in no abstract mood. There was a hush—then the voice of the minister, flowing on in sober monologue, then a little brightening of the overcast sky without, throwing a pale, clear light on the drooping head of the bride—then an awkward bend from Andrew, and Christina's little faltering curtsey of assent—after that a slight commotion, drawing off the gloves from agitated hands, which would not be un-

covered—then these same hands met—there was a prayer and a blessing, and then the attendant women tenderly put the little bride in a chair, and overwhelmed her with cares and caresses; and it was all over, with nothing remaining but shakings of hands, congratulations, dinner, dancing, and all manner of homely festivities.

With her hands folded softly over each other, and her eyes lifted with slightly reverential attention to the speaker, Mary Burnet stood and listened. Just at the end of the ceremony, turning round hastily, Mary found my eyes were not on the minister, but on herself. She had turned to say something—but she forgot the something, and could not say it. I saw a quivering flush of red come over her face—her eyes, those fearless, unembarrassed eyes, droop before mine; her very hands fall awkwardly out of the ease of their child's attitude, and her whole bearing become constrained and uneasy. I do

not know what strange terror at that moment came over me, but I cried "Mary! Mary!" in a tone of alarm and remonstrance, which plunged us both into still deeper confusion.

To my mother's side just then, another motherless girl, a great intimate of Mary's, had stolen for protection and kindness, and Mary went hastily to join them. Sybilla Wood, the other one, had been prophesied by many a good-humoured gossip "just the very sweetheart for Willie Mitchell," till we both of us took the rumour quite pleasantly, and were "burnt" together at Halloween, and thrown into each other's especial company on every occasion with the greatest good-humour in the world. Sibby Wood was romantic like me—an orphan, dependant on an uncle, whose large family made his charity a sacrifice, and whose wife received his poor niece only grudgingly. Sibby, who called herself Sybil, and had very grand dreams, had in her real life a very humble occupation, and did many

pieces of drudgery by no means pleasant to her high spirit, and wild girlish fancy. She was something of a beauty among us, not pretty as Christina Bell, or even Mary Burnet was, but with her tall form and black hair, and beautiful large blue eyes, something of higher pretensions than either of them. Our neighbours thought Sibby proud—and they were right—for the poor girl assumed sometimes an exaggerated stateliness out of despite at the mean fortune which neither nature nor exhortation could teach her to be contented with; but underneath this outer covering lay a rare, unconscious, unappreciated humility, belonging, I think, almost exclusively to the temper and constitution of genius. Sibby was no genius. I believe even that her delicate perceptions and high ideality made her *do* things *less* perfectly than many a common-place person, troubled with no ideal, could have done them; nevertheless the perceptions were there, and poor

Sibby had the sensitive temper and shrinking pride without the strength or the power.

As they stood together side by side, no contrast could have been more perfect than between the unconscious self-possession which returned to Mary Burnet after she left me, and the shrinking, shy self-consciousness of her companion. But I lose time thinking of these fresh days, when our fate was unknown to all of us—though even then the actual independent life had begun to lay its hand upon us, translating us out of the freedom of early youth into the individual cares and controversies appointed for our maturer lot.

CHAPTER IX.

In the west before us, a single star was looking out from a great hood of cloud—looking out with a bright intelligence which confused us, feeling that there was occasion for confusion, as if it made us conscious of the observation of some acute and arch spectator who knew what was in our heart.

Our heart—we were pausing to look down from the brae below Ailieford, upon the sea, which sent its singing voice through the night—upon the fishing village lying quiet in the hollow, with fitful moonlight paling its red.

roofs—and farther off, upon Arthur's Seat, breaking up abruptly at our left hand into one clear span of sky, where you could almost fancy some wandering angel had broken through the clouds to drop upon yon silvered peak, which the moonlight finding out, has detached and glorified. Sounds of dropping water, little runlets under the hedges, and globes of rain, which had held their precarious place there all day long, dropping down at last like tearful messages from the falling leaves above to the fallen leaves below—with the distant sigh of the sea, and the faint rustle of the bare boughs, touched by the plaintive winds of night, filled the atmosphere around us—us who were hushed into the awe and solemnity befitting the great event which had befallen us, who were listening in the charmed inner circle to which these external sounds were but a frame, to the tumultuous hasty beating of our hearts.

For we were standing hand in hand in the first hush of our betrothal, unconscious yet of anything but the softening thrill, the triumph, the awe, the joy which threw us into such an enchanted mist of silence. Words were thronging to my lips, but I had no power to say them; and Mary stood still, her eyes no longer frank and unembarrassed, rising and falling in shy, wistful glances, as rapid as the shadows on the sky; and her soft, warm hand lying quietly in mine.

But Mary's heart was flowing over; she found her voice bye and bye. "Willie, will you tell your mother?"

Ah! heart of woman, riddle to its possessor, its beholder!—this one could not give itself undivided—could not be content with one love however great, but sent off its tendrils to seize upon all the tender family ties, which nature had debarred itself from, but which it could grasp with all

its tenacious might, through the one greater affection which aspired to take the place of all.

Then we turned and went home—slowly, letting the distant voices fall into silence, and watching the parlour window brighten into sudden light—a signal that my mother was in her domestic place again, with all the day's excitement over.

"And, Mary, what shall I say?" asked I, bending over her that I might have the rare satisfaction of seeing her eyes droop under mine.

"Tell her, Willie," was all the instruction Mary gave me; we were neither of us very voluble in our new joy.

In some half-conscious way—I still holding fast upon my arm the trembling fingers of Mary's hand—we passed unobserved through the kitchen, and entered the parlour; the warm light dazzled us both, and Mary

shrinking back, tried to escape behind me; but I held fast by her hand, and would not let her go.

My mother was alone. Sitting before the fire, with the skirt of her new gown spread back upon her knee, she was leaning in her chair, gazing meditatively on the ruddy hearth before her. The candle, obscured and pale, stood behind her on the table—round about upon the walls, the flashing firelight marked out a distinct line of shadow, like the outline of land upon the sea—and the warm light came and went, as if in play, upon the silent figure, the face full of thought and unconscious repose, and reddened the snowy ribbons put on this morning to do honour to the bridal.

Behind her in silence and unnoticed, we stood for an instant. Then I drew Mary a step forward, and said, "Mother;" with a nervous start my mother turned round, and looked at us. Then she put on her

spectacles—then she lifted the candle to have a better view, and then with a face of bewildered astonishment exclaimed: "Bless me, bairns! what have you been doing?"

I had thought while we stood and watched her of something to say, but it disappeared from my memory, and I searched for it in vain; while Mary, drooping her head, and striving to draw her hand from my arm, stooped forward—I cannot tell whether to hide her burning face, or to bend to my mother's feet.

"What have you been doing, bairns?" repeated my mother; but as she spoke, she came forward, and, loosing my grasp from Mary's hand, drew my new betrothed into her own arms. "Silly thing! what would you greet for? It's me!" said my mother.

But Mary would greet, and did it, clinging to my mother's breast as I had never seen any one but our own little Mary cling before. I myself stood and looked on, a

little disconcerted—for no one said a word to me. Only a half-annoyed, half-pleased smile broke upon my mother's face as she looked towards me, and shook her head over Mary's shoulder.

But very soon we were soothed and calmed, and Mary stole away to arrange her bonnet, and I prepared to accompany her home. My mother shook my hand in an aside, and wished me joy; but now my father and Jamie had made their appearance, and I was not immediately anxious for sympathy from them.

"Dear me, Willie!" said my mother, after I had returned from my escort of Mary, and had been sitting unobservant by the fire for an hour or two, buried in a delicious dream; "I did say to you this morning that I would be glad to see that poor lassie in a house of her ain, but did I ever think you were to flee ower head into the like of this, without a day's serious thought about it?

No doubt I had a kind of desire you should turn your thoughts that way, and maybe come the length of speaking to Mary herself in a twelvemonth or so; but if it had not just been for her sake, poor thing! I would have been clean overcome to-night."

"But it's been in my mind, mother, many a day," said I, simply.

"Bless me, Willie! you're naething but a laddie!" said my mother, with a look of perplexity and annoyance, "and you've only had thirty pounds till this very last year," she continued, after a pause, "and what's forty pounds to undertake to keep a family; and if Mr. Middleton was to fail like the other lads, and you not a free man that could go to any place, but with the burden of a wife, and maybe more than a wife. Oh, Willie, laddie, what way were you so thoughtless?"

"Mary Burnet will never burden any man," said I, with some heat.

My mother would not compromise her favourite. I had done well to seize on this point.

"Mary Burnet could turn her hand to many a thing," said my mother, "but I would fain think no son of mine would take advantage of the like of that. Na, Willie; I ken what it is by myself. I was married sooner than I had any right to be. There were reasons for that, that were not in my hand; and many a hard day and wakeful night had I, before we came to this comfort that you have kent all your days. And Mary, poor thing, has had her troubles, too; but none of you ken what it is as I do. I'll never consent to Mary and you being married, Willie, till I see you have plenty to keep her on."

"And what will you call plenty, mother?" said I, trembling lest my father's glorious hundred a-year should be the standard.

"What will I call plenty?" my mother

paused, in a little confusion. "Well, Willie, my man, you ken it is just as folk think. Many a one, as I see in these foolish stories of yours every day, would call your father's income starvation. Weel, I wot they're no blate! And many a decent woman thinks I have a grand independence, and no a care to trouble me; but I would go to no extremity, Willie. With a good lassie like Mary Burnet, that would take her full share of her man's echt, and think little of a year or two's struggle to begin with, I would not insist upon more than just to keep ye comfortable, and a good appearance, as you've been used to, all your days. And if ye were careful and thrifty, if ye had just even sixty pounds in the year—"

"To keep two?" said I, with a great sigh of relief, and a flush of delighted anticipation. "We should be very well off, mother —better than many a young couple—as well as Andrew."

"Na," said my mother, promptly; "but maybe better, too, in some respects, Willie—I'll no say—for at least it would be your ain work and naebody's favour. Any way, we've no call to make comparisons—Andrew, poor man!"

And my mother made a sudden pause, with a secret tear glittering far away in the corner of her eye. I do not know very well why affectionateness so often takes the form of pity, but I, too, in sympathetic kindness, was considerably inclined to echo "Poor man!" though my heart had very little commiseration to spare for prosperous Andrew, who did not need to wait for his wife till his salary had reached the enviable eminence of sixty pounds a-year.

I cannot remember any pleasanter time of my existence, than the hour of my awaking on that following Sabbath morning. The day was bright, as it happened, with a serene blue sky, just touched here and there by a

soft little cloud as pure as snow—all very cold, and still with a fresh reminiscence of recent rains, but sparkling and animated with elastic air, and bold, joyous sunshine, putting even summer to shame. Waking to see such a sky looking in through my window—looking in with frank sympathy for the triumphant happiness in my heart—I lay still under its smiling eye, gradually acquainting myself with the cause of my own conscious triumph. And in leaps and swift floods of recollection, yesterday came back—yesterevening, with its darkness, its words, its silences, and the unspeakable new relationship into which I had entered! Mary, Mary! many a time you have come upon my eyes like sunshine—but never, I think, with such a power as then, when my heart suddenly beheld your half-withdrawing, timid figure and downcast eyes, a reason for all the joy of my awaking—a reason most subtle, sweet and potent, swelling into higher exultation as

every word and every touch flashed fresh upon my mind.

Mary did not meet us at church that morning. On Sabbath mornings poor Mary had many a time a heavy duty—for Dr. Burnet, long past all care for appearances now, made it the winding up of the week, a temporary rest to his shattered nerves and wasted mind; and whispers were abroad in the country, of partial attacks of the frightful delirium, attendant on his master vice, now and then beginning to assail the doctor. Naturally a man of extraordinary strength, he had managed hitherto to defy the demon; and never mortal ear heard from Mary that he had at last grasped his victim; but Mary could not drown the frenzied voice which neighbours sometimes began to hear, and her own half-scared, half-desperate look on these occasions confirmed the suspicion.

In the afternoon I set out to pay my first formal visit to my betrothed. Two thin tall

houses standing on the road side with gardens behind and some low cottages near, to contrast with their lean elevation, had brightened in the wintry sunshine, and looked less cold and shivering than usual, I thought, though they still turned a sharp naked shoulder to the keen sea-breeze. One of them, where the windows were a little brighter, and in the whole exterior of which I caught some faint reflection of Mary's instinctive purity and good order, was Dr. Burnet's. But poor Mary could not mend the broken paling, or keep the grass fresh over which the Doctor's pony trampled fretfully as he waited for his master every day.

Mary herself—for Mary had not even a little servant drudge to help her in her household duties, admitted me—admitted me with a sudden flush of pleasure, which the next moment waned into a clouded look of grief and disconcernment. But as she stood hesitating

at the door for a moment, and lifted her eyes in another shy glance to my face, the bright blush returned. It was our first meeting in open daylight, our first encounter *since*—and not all the pain in my poor Mary's heart could overcome the thrill and flush, and sudden conscious joy, with which she, as well as I, realized our engagement again.

"But he's ill, Willie," said Mary, standing upon the threshold still, and drawing the door nearly close behind her, as she came nearer to me, and gave me her hand. "He's ill, I cannot leave him—and I cannot—I can scarcely ask even you to come in to-day."

"But I must tell him, Mary," said I; "I have a right to come in now."

Mary looked up for an instant into my face—only an instant; a rapid glance which fell again under her downcast eyelids almost before it could be answered—but it spoke to me what words could not have spoken; the silent inexpressible comfort which this new

right of mine gave to my friendless Mary—and I was bold to go on.

"And I have a right to ask for all your troubles too. Tell me, Mary—"

"Whisht, there is nothing to tell—just he is ill, Willie; but there, he hears you; you must come in now."

I went in, for the doctor's hoarse voice called "Mary, Mary," and I went with earnest enthusiasm full of my right to comfort her.

CHAPTER X.

Dr. Burnet sat by the fire in an old arm-chair, wrapped in a long faded dressing-gown—himself a ruined Hercules, with gaunt decayed limbs, stretched out across the little hearth. People said he had been a "gallant-looking man," when youth and health had made his great frame handsome and elastic, and his immense figure still carried reminiscences of a better time. Traces, too, of the habits and feelings of a gentleman, and of a heart warm and vigorous, which might have been noble in its day, remained with

the lost and degraded man; and he had a strange universal popularity blended of pity and admiration, with which in his ordinary moods he was sufficiently well pleased, though now and then, in one of those dread awakenings which showed him the reality of his position, this only added an intolerable sting to the wound. Over his fine abundant hair, just grizzled at the edge—for he was still in the strength of middle age—he wore a worn black velvet cap; and his eyes, watery and bloodshot, wandered continually about the apartment with uninterrupted restlessness. The whole face was unsettled and varying, as if some great excitement was slowly subsiding, but had not yet lost its power.

The room was not large, and singularly furnished—furnished with incomplete heterogeneous articles, each snatched a relic from some previous shipwreck. The table in the middle was a library table, the chairs solid mahogany ones, such as furnish ordinary

plebeian parlours; but in a corner stood a small inlaid chess-table, delicate and costly, and faded silk peered out from the edge of the homely cover in which Mary had habited her own pretty low seat, with its carved back. The carpet worn and darned, and faded, had nevertheless been a Turkey carpet once, though the rug on which Dr. Burnet's feet rested was home made, manufactured after the fashion of my mother's, out of strips of black and red cloth. Of the books which hung in some shelves on each side of the fire-place, remains of a once considerable library, the doctor's medical books, were here and there diversified with a showy volume in tarnishing gilding, finest edition of some poet or essayist, stained and spotted with the use of dozens of indiscriminate borrowers. But strangely inconsistent as their different elements were, they had a coherence and unity after all, which turned my eyes, swelling over, upon Mary—Mary, household light,

household mistress — who made this room look like a home.

She was standing before the fire, in the plain blue merino gown,—her best—which she had worn at Andrew's wedding, with one hand relieved against her little muslin apron, and the other rested upon the mantel-piece, looking with anxious, deprecating looks into her father's face, and following his wild, restless eyes as they travelled round and round. She herself, in habitual reverence for the day, wore as scrupulously as if it were a religious observance, her sole Sabbath dress; and the linen under her father's unshaven face was spotless and snow-white; further, he was not to be ruled by Mary—and the wild, restless face, and slovenly, unregarded appearance, which told how entirely his own respect had ceased to belong to him, remained a contrast to everything else within Mary Burnet's reign.

"More visitors—more visitors," said the

Doctor, rapidly. "Who's this, Mary? Do you think we have not plenty unasked guests about the fireside already? what do you call this one?—or is he like all the rest? will he never tell his name?"

"It's Willie Mitchell, father," said Mary, in a voice scarcely audible to me, "Mrs. Mitchell's son in Ailieford. He came to see how you were."

"And what's his business how I am?" said the sufferer, with a muttered oath. "They're all kind enough, believe themselves—as if I did not hear them laughing and sniggering behind my chair," and he turned with a half terrified, half defiant air to look behind him. *I* saw nothing behind him but a foot or two of vacant space, and a blank wall; but it was peopled with mocking imps to him.

"Father, he has something to say to you—for we could not tell when you might be in on an every-day. It's only William Mitchell

—will you speak to him, father?" pleaded Mary.

Poor Mary! it was but in desperation, that I might see no more than was necessary of the Doctor's misery, that she, so reserved and womanly, prefaced my explanation thus.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Willie; sit down, if you can find a chair," said Dr. Burnet, holding out his hand to me, but turning away his eyes at the moment to fix them with a vindictive look of triumph on the back of his own arm-chair. "We'll hear what you have to say this moment; draw in to the fire, my man, and heed nothing that's in your way. As for you, ye imp of Satan!"

And the unfortunate man struck a violent blow upon the back of his own chair. The pain startled him; the curves of his brow, keenly drawn together with that gaze of passion, relaxed in a moment, and holding out his hand, he gazed at it stupidly. Then he glanced up with a helpless look of inquiry

to Mary. Mary could not conceal the bitter tears in her eyes.

"What makes the little fool greet?" exclaimed her father, peevishly, "I've hurt my hand, though; I was too fast, and missed him into the bargain. Tortured with these brutes of flies, Mr. Willie," added the Doctor, with a smile of apology, "where they come from in this cold weather is more than I can tell, but they torment the life out of me. If I had not missed that one, it might have made an example; but they're a set of wretched cowards the whole of them, and they'll be quiet now. You have something to say to me, I hear from Mary—say it now like a man, as long as I keep patience Mary will sit down and be quiet, not to disturb you, and I myself will be very glad to do a service to a young man. Now, your business, Mr. Willie."

The change was so complete in outward manner, while yet Dr. Burnet's consciousness

of the presence of his impish tormentors was so visible that I, who in any circumstances should have been confused and awkward, could scarcely articulate now, and entirely forgot everything which I had resolved to say.

"Dr. Burnet, I was speaking to Mary," stammered I at last.

"Well?" said the Doctor, hastily. He had drawn a book from the shelf beside him, and was taking aim with it at a spot in the carpet. My uneasy, embarrassed motions disturbed him in this; he glanced up, caught my eye, and turning with a baffled, mortified, half ashamed look, threw down the book again, and repeated "well?"

"And Mary, doctor," said I, "Mary—Mary—"

She had stolen away out of the room very quietly, and I suppose her familiar name and my shyness touched her father's heart.

"Well, Willie, my man," he said, suddenly

looking at me with some steadiness, and a kind smile, for which, "when he was himsel," he was famed, "what about Mary, Mary, Mary?"

"She consented when I told her, doctor," said I with more boldness—"when I told her she was everything to me, she heard me and gave me her promise. I thought it right to let you know at once. Next year I'll have fifty pounds, and good prospects after. I may even get into business for myself by-and-bye if I get Mary. I think I am able for anything with but the hope of that to strengthen me."

I had startled him into entire forgetfulness of his haunting demons. He roused himself, sat upright in his chair, passed his hand over his forehead. It was something of a shock.

"Mary — Mary — Mary," muttered Dr. Burnet; "so it has come Mary's day and hour too, as well as another's—and she

consented, did she—promised? I would not say but she was glad, like her mother before her. Women? you might say fools!"

I was not called upon to answer this; he did not speak to me.

"Mary!" said Burnet again, slowly. "Her mother's name was Mary—and *she* came out of another mother's arms to follow me. When she was there, she got the sun and a spring shower now and then like other flowers. In my hands she had greater experience. Was it I—was I to be like another mother to keep the wind and the hail from her? She came to me on equal terms, to bear what I bore. Ay, and she took up her share of the bargain, and broke her silly heart and died. Mary—Mary—Mater Dolorosa, mother of sorrows. Do you know they call the Bible Mary that, in Catholic countries still?"

"But they call her no less Queen of

Heaven, and chief among the saints," said I, with enthusiasm.

"A parcel of baseless fictions!" said the doctor, suddenly rousing himself again with polemic energy. "There's warrant for the other—good warrant—not a word for that. And so you want to get my Mary, Willie? And she has promised you. Poor little fool! They *will* always have their fate, you see—they never will learn till it's too late. Well! I fancy it must remain so till the world's end."

"Then, doctor, you consent," said I, breathlessly.

He was leaning his head on both his hands, looking into the fire with fixed eyes.

"I fancy it is very well," he said, more soberly. "My time in this world is coming to an end, and though I've been little to speak of as a father, I have always been something for Mary—a house, if it was not a home, or a happy one. Now I think you're a steady

lad, Willie—when Mary was born, I could have taken my oath I never would have given her to a poor clerk laddie with fifty pounds a-year; but it will be a consolation if I die at a hedge-side some day, to think there's a kind of poor provision for the motherless bairn. Your mother is a kindly woman, Willie—she has a heart and a spirit, and no girls of her own to contrast my poor Mary with; and I dare say you're as good as most youths of your years yourself. I'm glad it's you and not your brother. Yes, yes, I make no opposition; let the world be quit of me and my name; and as for Mary she must accept the course of nature. She has taken her fate at her own hand like her mother—let her work it out as she may."

After this there was a long pause. I heard the outer door open again, and a whisper of voices; but I was fascinated, and could not rise. Dr. Burnet sat still, leaning his elbows on his knees, and his head on his

hands, looking into the fire. These sounds were not enough to rouse him from his abstraction; and I sat opposite to him, looking on with a little awe, a strange interest. His long, thin hands, sallow and pale, supported the long cheek which had begun to grow hollow—the great cave sockets out of which shone his absorbed eyes. The long heavy locks of his hair touched with grey—the loose, limp, white neckcloth carelessly knotted round his throat, the broken-down, ruined appearance of the whole man, still retaining so many marks of original nobleness — these all affected me strongly—and, though I was eager to be with Mary, I could not disturb the reverie of her father.

The door opened softly, and Mary looked in. I fancy she, skilled in all the marks of this terrible malady, knew that the dark hour was gone; for by-and-bye she entered, bringing with her the other whisperer at the

door. It was Sibby Wood; and I remembered having heard before, that Sybil, as she called herself, was almost a favourite with Dr. Burnet.

He woke up, I saw, with a little animation to greet her, and then he turned to me again.

"I am glad it is you, Willie, and not your brother. Yon lad will be a perilous handful for whoever undertakes him. I am pleased it is you; and see you make a better man to Mary than I was to her mother."

This was my dismissal, and I turned away; but not till I had observed with wonder the sudden passion which seemed to dilate the whole person of Sybilla, as she turned sharp round upon Burnet and listened to him with flashing eyes and a curled lip. I, for my own part, was perhaps too selfishly engrossed to vindicate Jamie. *She* did not speak—but her foot unconsciously stamped on the ground, and

her face spoke more than words. Slightly starting as she saw me linger, Sibby blushed a great blush, and cast down her head a moment; but recovering herself, turned upon me again with a scorn and indignation only less than the first—I, who could, had not defended him.

"I think you scarcely know Jamie, doctor," said I; "you are not just to him, at least; but you have rejoiced myself so much that I cannot fight for my brother."

I went away when I had said this—which was said, to tell the truth, a great deal more for the poor girl's sake, whose secret I had guessed, than for Jamie's—and Mary came with me to the door.

"Tell nobody, Willie," were Mary's first beseeching words, "nobody at Ailieford—not even your mother—how you saw him to-day. Oh, Willie, Willie! many a time I could break my heart!"

"You must break no hearts now," said

I, "for the doctor consents, and I have you fast—Mary—"

But another call of Mary from the room interrupted me, and I had to leave her. Poor Mary! I kept her confidence, and no one heard of the doctor's malady from me.

CHAPTER XI.

I THOUGHT of that day as the second beginning of my life. I was one-and-twenty—by-and-bye I was to be married. The boy was a being past and gone, the life of dependance and obedience was over; henceforward I was to be my own authority; henceforward I had to recognise plainly the distinct individual course which lay before me. Increased capability for business—determination to make myself still more necessary in the office, and a person of higher weight and consideration there—great resolves for

self-improvement, self-restraint, self-elevation—and a distinct vision of the following year, spent after quite a heroic fashion, and full of one continual contemplation and approach towards the great event which should close it; with these designs my mind ran over as I walked in to Edinburgh on the following morning. It was still only dusk, and the road was sufficiently chill and wearisome—but my heart was full. I could not think of myself at all as the same idling desultory person I had been a week ago; no more wasted half hours, no more trifling days for me. I might even get into business myself, I repeated, now that I was secure of Mary sharing my elevation. I was very sincere if I had no great knowledge of myself to back me; and I expanded my breast involuntarily to the damp cold wind which came rushing upward from the sea, as I thought of the constant unwearying exertion before me; the struggle upward

never to be relaxed for an hour or a moment till its end was attained.

Jamie was considerably abstracted too, during that morning walk, and did not interrupt my meditations. I guessed that Jamie began to draw near a similar crisis to mine; but we exchanged no sympathies. The boyish shyness remained too strongly on us.

We were still lodged at Mrs. Cockburn's, and I remember how strangely it struck me to find everything in her little parlour—in her own running soliloquy, and in the general family thought and conversation—so entirely unchanged. Exactly as we had left it on Friday we came back to it on Monday, and nobody had the remotest idea that in either of us there was the slightest change.

The slightest change! a revolution greater than the revolutions of kingdoms; so I held it at least in my boyish enthusiastic

devotion to my love, and to the object of my love.

Jessie Cockburn, married a year ago, was now a neat little wife with a baby, and a more orderly house than her mother's. Sulky Geordie, having attained the end of her ambition, and being now able to twist up her pretty hair in a little hard knot, and cultivate a crop of "front" curls, had softened out of her sulkiness. There were perhaps other reasons for this; Geordie was now nineteen, called Miss Cockburn, and a milliner "for her own hand"—and very pretty things, as I thought, came out of that same hand of Geordie's, which in itself had come to be a rather good-looking hand. And little Bell had been promoted to the long pinafore, while Geordie sat dignified in linen collar, black neck-ribbon, and smart apron; but Bell, an odd merry little heart, succeeded to none of Geordie's sulkiness—it remained

an undercurrent, fortunately not often visible, with its original possessor.

"Eight o'clock chappit, and nae word of our Tam yet," said Mrs. Cockburn, "od, if I see muckle mair of this, and ken the callant fa' into a' his faither's ill ways, I'll break my heart — I will; and Jamie Mitchell. Ye may as weel think of the moon coming in at seven to her tea as look to see Jamie, though I ken he's mony a time out of the warehouse afore the half hour. Eh, Sirs, thae laddies! I've heard folk say daughters are a fash, and ill to bring up, and maybe so they are in a measure — ye canna hae weans without having tribulation. Bell, ye little vegebone! is that the way ye use my guid teapot?—but it's maistly when they're very wee bairns, or else it's just wildness and mischief, and nae ill in the creatures' heads; but laddies are a sore handful, out of the house, and in the house, aye in the road of temptation, and ane

never can reckon what length they may gang."

Geordie sits at the table, listening for once to-night to the soliloquy which on ordinary occasions nobody listens to; and Geordie's eyebrows are curved into great puckers over her anxious eyes. I can see as I glance at her, what a world of impatience and solicitude exhibits itself in these hasty gestures, in the hot hands which soil her silk and net, in the thread which is continually breaking, and the needle which will fall from her heated fingers. Geordie is a strange creature, full of thoughts which are entirely unknown and invisible to the household, and somehow, little as he deserves it, Geordie half adores her brother Tom. I am not sure that she has not a kindlier feeling than usual for my brother, too; but the other love is not to be doubted.

And my eyes, suddenly opened to things of higher importance than the mere pleasures of young manhood, look as anxious as

Geordie's, when hour after hour passes by, and there is still "no word" of Tom. Cockburn and Jamie. Somehow, I myself am very idle that night, and feel no inclination to plunge immediately into the strenuous exertions of which I mused in the morning. It is true I am anxious about my brother, and this anxiety lulls my conscience comfortably asleep.

"I wish you would speak to them, William Mitchell," said Geordie in a burst, as her mother left the room, attended by Bell, for some business in the kitchen. "What's the use of being a man if folk are to sit quiet at the fireside the haill night? Wha heeds me if I say anything? and as for my mother, they might heed her, but just that she's aye speaking. Man, Willie Mitchell, what's the use of growing up, and reading books, and turning to be a man, if you're to do nae good to other folk a' your days?"

Geordie spoke in a perfect storm of suppressed indignation and rage, struggling with a burst of passionate tears, and gnashing her teeth upon me. Her anxiety, poor girl, was of a more vehement kind than mine, and I saw it had reached to a paroxysm and could be kept in bounds no longer. But the fierce, sudden question struck me dumb—I could answer nothing to it.

"I slippit out one night mysel'—I never told a living mortal—to follow them and see where they ga'ed; and I went after them to a house in the Lawn-market, and lookit in through a window, and saw them and some mair, round a table, and toddy steaming before every one. Maybe it's nae ill—I'm no saying it's ony ill," said Geordie, choking with tears, yet unable to relinquish her tone of defiance, "but I would like to ken what it was that brought down my faither, but just the like of that; and they go to waur

places than yon—and man, Willie, Willie, can ye no speak to them?"

Poor Geordie! she had still all the innocent confidence of inexperience and simplicity; to "speak to them," seemed all that was necessary for their deliverance—only a voice of authority, a remonstrance of some weight and influence, and her whole heart would have been satisfied.

"I'll go myself to take care of them," said I, hastily.

"Will ye, Willie—will ye? Oh! man, if I was like you, I would gang to the end of the world for Tam," said Geordie. "And if you would only make them come hame!"

"They are young men, Geordie," said I. "Sometimes the worst thing for them is to keep them too fast at home: men should see the world—they cannot aye sit by the fireside like women."

Suddenly checked thus, Geordie glanced up and round the dusky parlour. Her

mother's voice just then in the pause of our conversation became distinctly audible, running on in its monotonous hum. The poor girl glanced round upon the dim walls, the table littered in the nearest corner with her own materials—her mother's coarse work-basket full of stockings to mend, on the other side —the kettle on the side of the grate, the fire, built up after a frugal fashion of Mrs. Cockburn's own invention, adding no light to help the solitary candle which Geordie and I shared—and to Geordie's eyes, gleaming large and full under her contracted brow, thrre came a strange, wistful, melancholy full of pathos and unspeakable tears.

There was no attraction for *them* then in this dim, unlovely home ; that was the secret. Here, where the woman sat all day long without any possibility of escape from the daily necessities which must be done, let her heart and spirit rebel as they would, the man must be tempted with something fairer and

brighter—comforts and gladsomeness beyond necessity. Something of a new revelation burst upon poor Geordie; startled out of her former passion, her eyes sought mine with a wistful, anxious inquiry which smote me more sorely than audible reproach, and one or two large tears fell noiselessly upon her hands. Here was something to be done —a great want to be remedied—and before it all the sullen anger which had been but a veil for her loving anxiety, fell in an instant.

"I hear them speaking of this one that can sing, and that one that can draw, and Annie Clephane that plays the piano," exclaimed poor Geordie. "*I* canna do a thing in the world but the millinery and the house work, and my mother will never be fashed with company, and I'm no heeding; but I'll tell you, Willie, what I'll do if you'll help me. My mother's real good to hear reason when ye get begun to speak to her; and I'll get acquaint with the neighbours

myself, and ask folk here. And if we burnt two candles and had a better fire, the room would be cheerier, Willie; and young men in books and in sangs like parties where girls are," said Geordie with a blush and some sudden tears. "It's aye surely as good as the house in the Lawn-market. I'll try to make this place better for them, Willie—oh! I will, I will! and so will my mother."

Just at this moment the kitchen door opened, and we heard the distinct approach of Mrs. Cockburn's voice. Geordie started, dashed away some tears from her cheek, wiped some from her hands, and bent closely over her work—so closely, that only I, sitting beside her, could see the great tremor of her frame, and the heaving of her troubled breast.

"I think I'll go and look for Jamie. I'll bring them both in with me," said I as I went away; and Mrs. Cockburn herself approached poker in hand, to break up the fire, "that

it might be cheerier for the laddies when Willie brought them hame;" both mother and daughter had some faith in me.

No, I was no longer a boy; no more dwelling in the peaceful region of boyish frolics and mischances, of brief reproof, and smiling forgiveness. Great startling master emotions began to come under my hands. Love, which could find no relief in anger, no comfort in the forgiveness which it instinctively extended, unasked and undesired. The blind temerity of youthful vice rushing into its own destruction; the great gaunt giant Despair, sitting still in conscious unredeemable ruin with that destruction all accomplished. I, sailing on my own course in the half dream of youth, carelessly light-hearted, aware of few responsibilities, shifting all cares to the father and the mother whose verdict was absolute, and taking no heed of snares which my own temper and inclination made unattractive to me—I, started out

of all this as a somnambulist might start, awaking out of the night of his dream into the thronged daylight of the outer world. This outer world, into which I opened my astonished eyes—this real world of wonderful verities, where men in millions fought single-handed, every one with his own band of assailants, every one for himself—where thousands sank and fell, and were trampled on and forgotten every hour—this world of vain heroic struggles, of hopeless failures, passive submissions, cowardices, braveries, deaths—I was here fully awakened, at length a man, not to look on, but to take my part in the inevitable fight.

In my flush of ecstatic hope in the morning, in the startled seriousness of my evening thoughts, I saw one common end. I, thus roused and quickened by a joy which was all my own, by misfortunes which I only partially shared, was to live henceforward the heroic life; and no sympathy with the woes

of others could deprive me of the elastic bound and exhilaration of spirit, with which I rose to meet my fate.

After some considerable search, during which my own anticipations for the future very pleasantly obscured the present anxiety I felt, I found at last, in Geordie's hated house in the Lawn-market, Tom Cockburn and my brother. After a little delay, in high, almost riotous spirits, and perfect good-humour, they returned with me—and for one night poor Geordie's heart was comforted.

CHAPTER XII.

THIS distinct period and era faded, as all eras must fade. Life got subdued into its usual shadows again, and lost its prominent light and relief; and I—alas for youthful resolution — fell back into my ordinary trifling—resolving every day on a more vigorous life to come, yet letting every day follow its predecessor in the same ignoble round.

I kept my place undisturbed in Mr. Robert Middleton's—very true; I did my routine business creditably enough, and was

rather a favourite; but, after all, I found it infinitely easier, and more agreeable, to dream of Mary Burnet than to make active exertions for her sake. My walk into town on Monday morning was invariably full of grand resolutions, projects and hopes—what I was to do, and what attain to; but, unhappily, it always remained a thing to be done—I never began to reduce my visions to practice.

Meanwhile, Dr. Burnet's terrible malady made way upon him, and increased, coming in more frequent and severer fits. As the spring grew into summer, I saw that these terrible excitements and agitations were wearing the strength of Mary. Her manner became nervous and hurried, and many a start and involuntary pause of listening, testified to me the painful claims upon her attention; but Mary never told the nature of her father's illness—scarcely hinted at it, even to me.

"Another year, Mary," said I, "and our little house can begin. I wish you would just come into Edinburgh with my mother some day, and let me see where you would like to live. You may laugh at me—I have no objection; but it would be a pleasure to my solitude to see the place where we shall be together hereafter."

"But, Willie, many a thing must come before that," said Mary with her grave face.

"Many a thing!—no doubt," said I, gaily. "For instance, there is your own braw gown to buy and make, Mary; but then you say yourself that we must take time to furnish our house, and not think of beginning now."

Mary paused a little; her face began to look habitually careworn, and there was a flush now upon its usual paleness. "Yes, Willie," she said, in a faltering doubtful voice, "but—you're no to think me selfish—it's not for me. But when we begin, we

would need to have enough to carry on with —we would need to be sure; your mother says that, Willie."

"Of course," said I, with some heat; "my mother has been speaking to you as if I were only a boy yet, and needed constantly to be put in mind of what I have to do. Do you think, Mary—do you really think that I can ever forget it? Not for an hour! and I am very certain that I only need to be fairly set to work, to make myself the principal man in Mr. Middleton's office."

"I am sure of that," said Mary eagerly. "But is there no opportunity to do it now?" she continued, after a short, breathless pause, "for, Willie, you're free now, and every step you mount up is all new gain and prosperity; but maybe, by-and-bye, if you had a house to keep—and—and your hands burdened, and your mind full of care—. Maybe you think me selfish and worldly, Willie—I

cannot tell what to say—I am only thinking what is right."

These few words, said with great evident pain and embarrassment, had a singular effect upon me. Something of the bewilderment with which a traveller on a twilight road suddenly finds himself arrested by a blank wall before him, checked my mind at once, and peremptorily. What to answer I did not know; for there was something so perfectly true, sensible, and honest in the speech, and it revealed my own trifling to my eyes so conclusively that my first sensation was not anger—an indefinite pain that Mary should so address me, joined to a very distinct conviction that what she said was not only just, but entirely accordant with her natural form of mind and character, conspired to keep me dumb. I was pained—not for myself so much as for her; at the same time I acknowledged that she was right.

"Willie," continued Mary, with a melancholy tone in the voice, which had ceased to falter with shyness, "I will very soon be friendless, and homeless, and an orphan. I seldom speak about it—but I know that it comes; and all the cares I have had and troubles about the house, and money, and such hard things, have made me too much what folk call prudent. When I am left alone, I will be glad to work for myself, and I can. I am not feared for that—but I *would* be feared if we were together, with a house to keep, and you just what you are now. We might have enough or we might not—it's no that either; but unencumbered you may do better, Willie—you may get up, and be a merchant yourself. I know you never will, if you get a house and a burden, and are settled now."

Mary had come to speak with perfect calmness before she concluded, and her self-

possessed, unfaltering gravity contrasted painfully to me with my own agitation.

"Mary!" I exclaimed, "what is it?—tell me what I have done that you should cast me off?"

"I never meant to cast you off, Willie—never—never," said Mary, with a little blush and tremble, "only that we might be best to wait longer, or if you could have the opportunity now—"

The opportunity!—the fortunate chance for which, like thousands more, I stood waiting in contented indolence—but Mary's words had roused me to some anger and indignation, if not with myself, certainly with the misappreciation of me, which galled my pride so much. I answered with some heat:

"If I could have the opportunity! I will tell you, Mary, what I can do to satisfy you. I will make the opportunity; ay, and

take advantage of it, too. What is fortune good for, but to be forced by a bold spirit? —she constantly succumbs. I will *make* the chance, Mary—see if I do not; and then repent of speaking so harshly to one that never had but a lofty thought of you."

I spoke with considerable excitement, my whole frame thrilling with the rash resolution of injured pride. I felt Mary tremble too, as her hand crept a little farther on my arm, with timid affection. But, somehow, in spite of this gesture, I felt a coldness in Mary's tremor—the coldness, not of lessening love — I did not fear that — but of troubled apprehension, of doubt, of distrustful fear.

In a few minutes we parted; she to return with grave and anxious looks, and with this chill of constraint upon her heart and shiver in her frame, to the room where her poor failing father, quiet in the evening, after a violent paroxysm, dozed in his chair beside

the fire, stupified and silent; while I, with the quickened pace and elevated head suitable to my lofty and resentful purpose, went on over the dark road, crushing fallen boughs under my feet with angry pleasure, towards Ailieford.

It was autumn now again—late autumn dark and melancholy—and the night was full of wild, fitful gusts of wind, of little storms of falling leaves, and of the sound of swollen burns, loud in the darkness. My cheeks glowed as I faced the blast, and planted my heel upon the long, bare bramble branches projecting over the pathway. I did not remember at the moment how Mary, sitting in the quiet room I had left behind, listening to the eerie leaves as the wind rustled after them in ceaseless pursuit, or to her father's heavy breathing — the sole accompaniments of her Sabbath evening thoughts—might feel, a cold burden at her heart, these very doubts and fears which I

resented as an injury to me; I only felt that Mary had descended a little from the eminence where my fancy had throned her. She was right—she was right—she was very right; something within me echoed a complete vindication of the justice of every word she said, into my ears, and my judgment consented that Mary Burnet had spoken only as it belonged to her nature to speak, and had not, in fact, strayed a step from her true and real standing-ground; but my heart was not to be satisfied so. If I was a little angry for myself, I was pained for Mary; I could not persuade myself to acknowledge that this should have been said by her.

It was October, nearly a year since our first betrothal—and Andrew's little bride had grown a staid young matron, and Andrew himself was old in his dignities, and might have been head of a house for fifty years, so gravely did he carry its honours. More than

that, a little new-come baby gave the new house a deeper interest to my mother, and stirred some strange emotions in all our hearts—a year rife of events to others, of purposes to me; but my worldly position remained exactly the same as when I stood upon the brae below Ailieford with Mary by my side, on the night of Andrew's wedding, and received her troth-plight, and gave mine, under the dewy stars. The changed being, the lofty man, which to my own eyes I had seemed then, disappeared strangely now; and I was only Mr. Middleton's boy-clerk, getting my slow advancement of salary like any other youth of my years, and doing nothing to deserve more.

Yet I went home indignant and resentful, grieving for Mary, who had suffered in my eyes a temporary humiliation, and at strife with all the world

CHAPTER XIII.

On the following night when I went home as usual to Mrs. Cockburn's, I observed some unusual attention bestowed on myself for which I could not account. Little Bell, crossing her hands under her pinafore, with her hair plaited in a multitude of tight, thin plaits, which forcibly kept her eyes open, and made them even rounder, and blacker, and wickeder than usual, nodded her strange little scrubby head at me, with odd skirls of laughter quite inexplicable. Geordie looked up mysteriously from her work—and

Mrs. Cockburn herself addressed me with unusual solemnity.

"So this is you at last, William Mitchell. We might have keepit yon poor thing, Geordie, and let her get a rest and a cup of tea—she lookit to have need o't—if I had thought he would have been in sae soon; but I didna bid her come back till seven o'clock for fear. And I wouldna wonder if she just daundered about the streets between this and then, being a country lassie, poor thing, and innocent—which I wouldna thole in a daughter of mine, for there's aye unceevil folk in the streets at night. Bell, if ye make ony mair of your antics in my sight, I'll let you ken; and what are ye giggling at the poor callant for? Weel, he's just a lad like ilka other, and mony a ane does a thing out of pure innocence that looks like ill to folk mair experienced in the world. I wouldna blame him—and I wouldna say but she's a good lassie too, even if he is her joe."

"What is it?" I exclaimed. "Who has been seeking me, Mrs. Cockburn? Geordie, tell me who it was?"

"Eh, it was a woman," said little Bell. "She was bigger than our Geordie, but no ony aulder, and had bonnie blue e'en and black hair. She was bonnier than Miss Mary that I saw at Ailieford, when Tam took me out on the fast day; it wasna her, it was anither woman."

"Anither woman!" said Geordie, indignantly, "it was a young lady, Willie."

It was not Mary—that was some consolation; but who else could seek me?

Not my sister-in-law, Christina; for they knew her, and her comfortable self-importance was the last thing in the world to provoke compassion. I sat down very uneasily at Mrs. Cockburn's tea-table, gradually working myself into a state of high excitement—who could it be?—till at last I was half-persuaded that I stood in one of the "situa-

tions" of my old favourite romances, and that this was a mysterious heroine, with some occult claim upon my regard, who came to make me the avenger of her wrongs.

Geordie sat with breathless interest, watching me. I could perceive that, though she seldom lifted her head from her work. Poor Geordie's notable plan of party-giving, and all her innocent wiles to attract her brother and mine to their home, had only achieved a very partial and temporary success—so had my plans for their benefit; and, indeed, my own vigilance after a little while greatly slackened, and I had permitted myself, for many months, to fall back into my former passive, observant, uninfluential state. Jamie and Tom were still out late night after night, and still made their appearance, when they did come in, with excited and obstreperous mirth; while Geordie, growing very gray and grave, sat at her work all the night through, with

tightened lips and abstraction, half angry, half sullen. The ordinary current of life had never come to Geordie—she was not floating on its warm waves like others of her age, but stranded here already to work and watch, and think by herself in conscious solitude. She was predestined already, an old maid, and one of the most individual of the race.

But my thoughts were far from Geordie, though I was aware of her intent observation—far from Geordie, wandering away into every channel of wonder—guessing, marvelling, expecting—and with a start which sent the blood tingling to my very finger points, I listened to the first stroke of seven.

I thought the air had scarcely ceased vibrating with this sound, when a low, timid knock came to the outer door. Little Bell flew to answer it.

"Ye'll bring her in here," said Mrs.

Cockburn. "And, Willie, I'll be nae obstruction; ye can sit down on the auld settle yonder, and have your crack out; for I am sure I never was ane to stand in ither folk's gate, as lang as—"

"There's a fire in the kitchen—let Bell take her there," cried Geordie. Geordie was almost as much excited as I was—and she immediately threw down her work and followed Bell to the door.

A low voice, which I did not recognise, became faintly audible—then the sound of breaking into a blaze the smouldering kitchen fire, which startled Mrs. Cockburn into audible reverie touching the wastry and destruction of the bairns; and then Geordie coming in, thrust into my hands a little brass candlestick, and whispered in a voice of sympathy, which had reached the fever point: "I've put her in the kitchen—hastye, Willie."

What I expected as I obeyed, I scarcely

can tell; but I started back with a loud exclamation when the stranger in the kitchen lifted her veil, and showed me, worn with distress and agitation, the face of Sybilla Wood.

She was standing before the fire, her slender figure fully relieved against its ruddy light; and Sybilla's hands were clasping each other with nervous anxiety and pain, and her face, always pale, was marble white, and her eyes were large, dilated, and unsteady, like a sky full of rain. As I entered, she stretched out those painful, restless hands towards me, cried: "Oh! Willie, what am I to do—what am I to do?" and burst into a passion of tears.

My first emotion was entire bewilderment; my second, a confused and overpowering dread. I did not see herself, poor girl, who stood before me, bowing her head in her hands in uncontrollable emotion. I only saw some calamity, crime, or misfortune

fallen upon my brother, and I gasped before her in silent dismay.

But at last I recovered myself sufficiently to draw one of Sibby's hands from her face, and place her in a large wooden arm-chair which stood by the fireside. She herself grew calm immediately; but still she turned her eyes pitifully upon me, and repeated her question: "What am I to do?"

"What is it, Sybil?—what has happened? Is there anything wrong at Moulisburgh—what is the matter?" asked I.

She looked at me for a moment in silence, wistfully perusing my face. "I thought you might know—I thought you might maybe know," she said, with a long sigh. "He might have told you, Willie—I asked him to tell you; but mind, I'm no complaining—I've nothing to complain of. No, Jamie's very kind—only, poor fellow, he has not the means, and it's all my blame that consented too soon."

"Sibby, Sibby! what has Jamie done?—tell me what it is?" I exclaimed anxiously. "I thought him only young and light-hearted with no ill. What is it, Sibby—tell me what the wretched boy has done."

"You must call him no such names to me," said Sybil, lifting her pale face proudly, and shaking off my hand. "He's mine more than he's yours, Willie Mitchell, and I will never hear man nor woman say an ill word of him; and he's done no ill, poor man, poor man!" said Sibby, drooping her head again, while the blood gradually rose over her face. "It's only me—for I'm Jamie's wife."

It is impossible that any description of mine could convey the touching effect of these words as she said them, with a mixture of timid, shrinking confusion, of innocent girlish pride, and of the sad and bitter experience to which already this new life had brought her. Poor Sybil! I could

scarcely answer, even with a look, the glance of mingled pride and shame, simple dignity and shyness, which she hastily lifted to my face.

"When was this?" I asked at last. "If you are Jamie's wife, Sybil, you are my sister —you must tell me everything, now."

"I meant to do that, Willie," said Sybil, faintly returning the pressure of my hand, "I did not come to himself, because—because I thought it might maybe vex him, or it might be at a wrong time. I thought you could tell me what was best; and I never cared for myself, Willie, what became of me —never—and I could sew to make my own bread, or do anything. If I was fit for nothing else, I would rather serve among strangers, than either burden him, or get taunts from them yonder; only maybe I'm too proud—too proud—and I have to think of him now, as well as myself."

I caught only indistinctly the meaning of

these last half-articulate words, but I saw clearly enough the desolation of the rest. Poor Sibby! poor new wife! Alone herself and unfriended, she had yielded to her boyish lover's caprice for their secret marriage—now where was the husband who should have received her when she fled to him an outcast? Where? Loud in boyish revelry, making speeches, singing songs, drinking toasts, in the house in the Lawnmarket to which Geordie had traced him—as much engrossed with the coarse pleasures of the moment, as if there were no such being as this in the world.

And what was she to do? I had never before been cast upon so perplexing a problem. While I pondered and hesitated, Sybil, to whose exhausted frame the rest, and warmth, and light were alike grateful, leant back in the chair wearily, and closed her eyes. There were strange elements of unusual poetic beauty in this face, as I gazed

at it in its perfect repose and paleness—a face of melancholy thought, revealing but too clearly what capacities of suffering lay below.

And after my fashion, I wandered away from the emergency of the moment to bring Mary Burnet here, and place her by Sybil's side—Mary Burnet, with her clear, daylighted face, her sober griefs and pleasures, her forethought and wise consideration of after-coming possibilities which, at their worst, must needs have been lighter than this misery into which Sibby had made so desperate a leap. The wise and the unwise—the judgment which restrained a warm heart from a lesser venture, the heart which staked its all like a mad gamester on one throw; but I came to no decision on their respective merits—I only turned away with a sigh.

It roused Sybil from her momentary resting. She opened her eyes, and looked up to me hastily.

"I have never asked advice before," she

said, moving restlessly in her chair; "but it's not for myself now, Willie, it's for him more than me. And what am I to do? My aunt cast me out of the house—cast me out with scorn and shame — would not believe me!" and Sybil dashed her small clenched hand against the elbow of the chair, her face flushing over with burning shame and passion. "Me—me!—that a woman should think me such a wretch—me that would sooner have died! I will not think of it," said Sybil, rising with a hasty gesture, as if shaking off some encumbrance, "and I must lose no more time, waiting and speaking about it, for fear I get crazed. Have you anything to say to me, Willie, or must I take my own counsel?"

Her mind was recovering itself — recovering its native force and impetuous action. I saw the hands, hitherto only clasped together painfully, begin to stir and

move about with restless impatience, plucking at her shawl and dress—and her foot patted the floor, and her eyes glanced about with quick, vivid glances—she could wait for me no longer.

"I cannot tell where he is now, Sybil," said I; "but I can find him no doubt, and you must see himself."

A sudden gleam shot out of Sybil's eyes —it looked like joy; and then a painful flush of anxiety came to her face—of uneasy, distrustful, terrified anxiety. The young husband had killed with his own hand the girl's enthusiastic faith in him. She herself had ventured all for Jamie; but it was impossible to misinterpret the look of feverish terror with which Sybil anticipated his reception of her.

The terror of love and of a generous heart, which feared nothing for itself so much as it feared unworthiness in him — un-

worthiness which already it trembled for with deadly cold suspicions, harder than any personal distress.

We went out together immediately; I avoiding as well as I could the inquiries of Mrs. Cockburn, and the eager looks of Geordie. As my companion laid one thin, small hand on my arm, I saw that she raised another to her face, to put away some encumbering tears. That white face under its veil, like the moon in the clouded sky above us—I looked at it with reverence, almost with fear. She was younger than I by some years, yet what a stride this poor girl had taken before me into the bitterness of real life.

CHAPTER XIV.

"I MUST go to him myself—nobody must come between Jamie and me."

She disengaged herself quietly from my arm—quietly, yet with a decisive motion not to be remonstrated against; and I saw she was right. So I myself subsided into a dark close-mouth, and watched her timid figure disappear into the lighted door-way. I had ascertained before that Jamie was there.

The night was a dark and wild October night, full of wintry, drifting clouds. Looking straight up between the black, rock-like

walls which shut me in on either side, I saw great masses of clouds, flying ominously before the wind which pursued them with a shriek like an avenging spirit. Behind me was the dark court-yard of an immense "land" of houses; before, the open crown of St. Giles hung dimly between me and the sky, and just a step beyond my concealment contrasting strangely with its utter blackness, was the pavement of the High Street crowded with its characteristic loungers; but in spite of the spectator habit of my mind, I could take no interest then in the gossipping Edinburgh crowd. I was thinking of the night of my own betrothal—I was thinking of Mary in her sober wisdom, and of poor, unwise Jamie, and his young sorrowful wife.

And Sybil too had known the dreamy, inarticulate joy, throbbing with all gentle hopes, of this betrothal time. Come and gone; and here she went timidly, a young

wife, a bride yet almost, to ask her husband's protection, with a dread that it would be given to her grudgingly, if given at all.

A shadow fell upon the lighted door-way. It was Sybil coming out—and immediately following her was Jamie, hurriedly putting on his hat, and looking, as I perceived, out of temper and annoyed. They came into the shadow of a dark house out of the glare of the shop-lights, and so near that I could hear them. I did not move from my own post—I was too anxious, and too deeply interested to think of eaves-dropping.

"Well, Sibby, what do you want?—and what on earth has brought *you* to Edinburgh at this time of night?" said Jamie, somewhat sharply.

Sybil began to speak at once in a low, hurried voice, so quick that I could scarcely gather the agitated words which crowded on each other with such rapidity.

"I have no place to go—she found it out

—everything—to-day—and shut the door upon me. I would rather have died than gotten the names she called me—oh, Jamie! —the shame—the shame!—for she did not believe me when I said I was married. I came away in the afternoon, and I've been wandering about ever since—I scarcely can stand, and there's not a house in all the world I can go to, to get shelter, and her voice is aye ringing in my ears till I get half mad thinking about it—and me your wife!"

But Jamie set his back against the wall, and in the fitful moonlight, I saw his face for a moment—it was the face of one provoked, bewildered, who felt all this as a personal injury, and resented it—resented it upon the principal sufferer.

He did not speak for a full minute—a minute which must have seemed an hour to poor Sibby, as it did to me.

"Well, what do you mean to do?" he said at last.

I do not believe Jamie was sensible of the cruelty of these words. Sybil turned away from him, and pressed both her hands on her side; but I had seen first one of these small, nervous hands clenched violently, and dashing through the air, in the bitter passion of the moment. She made no answer, unless the drooping, averted head, and low moan of utter wretchedness could be called such.

"You might have come to me through the day, or sent me warning," said Jamie, sullenly. "What can a man do at this time of night? and my landlady never heard I was married, nor Willie, nor anybody. You might have gotten a room someway near, if you had come to me in time; but what's the use of calling a man away, when he's enjoying himself, to hear such a story as this?"

Still Sybil made no answer. I believe that passionate words, too bitter to be spoken, were pressing to her lips, and that it was no

self-control, but only the absolute force of passion, acting as an unwilling restraint, which kept her silent.

A sound of voices reached us from the house they had left, and Jamie looked wistfully back; then he drew suddenly closer to his poor young wife.

"Come, Sibby, we'll maybe get a room somewhere close by—come quick, I'll go with you, and look for one."

"No, Jamie, never mind—I'll go home."

She was drawing her shawl more closely round her, and with hasty, nervous fingers securing her veil to shade her face; her head was still turned away, her voice scarcely audible. It had no effect upon Jamie, this sudden calmness; but I, looking on with more thorough command of my faculties than he, was startled and alarmed.

"You'll go home? that's a sensible lassie, Sibby; but you needn't have given me such a fright, you know, when it was to end in

that. You'll just be in time for the last coach. Come away, I'll walk to Princes Street with you, Sibby."

"Never mind," said Sibby again, hurriedly; "I can go myself—it's no far—and they're waiting for you yonder. Never mind me, Jamie; good-night."

"Woman, I wish you were staying here, after all," said Jamie; "but I must not think of myself, and it's better for you to be at home. Am I not to go to the coach with you, then, Sibby? Well, they *are* waiting. Good-night, and take care of yourself, like a good lassie—good-night, Sibby, my dear—good-night."

And he left her standing there shivering in the dark, and went away to join his boisterous friends. I scarcely could believe it possible; but there before me was Jamie's active, manly figure disappearing into the light, and here, within a step of my concealment, his wife stood in the darkness,

looking up wildly at the drifting clouds, homeless and alone.

I stepped forward softly, and touched her arm—my own plan was already formed.

"Oh!—ay, it's you, Willie," said Sibby, in a rapid whisper. "I've said I was going home—so I am; good-night."

And she glided away past me, with her ghost's face, into the full light of the streets.

Following her, I made her take my arm. The poor, bewildered girl did it passively, and went on at a quick pace, unconsciously murmuring to herself half-aloud:

"There's the Esk and the sea—the Esk and the sea—and a' the cauld, black woods where they could never find me. I'll gang hame—I'll gang hame."

Poor heart! poor heart! We were crossing the North Bridge at the moment, and the cold blast sweeping up the dark valley under it, made her slender form shiver. Lights gleaming in the high houses fronting us—

the cheerful din and glow of Princes Street before, and of the old town behind; but Sibby paused on this cold isthmus between to look down into the darkness under her feet, and along the black range of fields and gardens to where the wan moonlight rounded the abrupt cliffs of the Castle, and threw a wild gleam over the dark foliage in the hollow at its feet. It was here that I heard her desperate words.

"Sibby!" exclaimed I, in terror, clutching her hand upon my arm.

She lifted up her head at once, and met my eyes with a sudden consciousness of guilt in her face. And suddenly—too, as suddenly even as the white moon-gleam, which a flying cloud permitted to tremble over us uninterrupted for a moment, the frenzy died out of Sybil's eyes. She continued looking at me steadily, as if slowly gathering her powers to her; then she spoke.

"Not that, Willie—not that—I never meant it; no, no, I have to live, for there's more than me—more than me to think of. I will go back as I said, and somebody will take me in this night, and then— I can do something for myself, Willie—I've been brought up that way all my days; it's not like as if it was new now."

And Sibby put her hand upon her injured heart. I felt her delicate figure swell and tremble with great throbs of suppressed anguish; but she did suppress them bravely.

"Come, we are going home," said I—"home to my mother, Sibby, who likes you almost as well already as if you were her own. You are our own now, my poor little sister—and I am going with you to see you safe at home."

"No, no, no—" said Sibby, hurriedly. "No, not there—I can never go there. He did not want me—why should I go to his

mother? No, no, I must go to strangers; for I have no friends in all the world."

I said nothing in answer to this, and her voice ran on for a while half audibly, though I only caught here and there a distinct word; and great, convulsive sobs began to overpower all the poor girl's self-restraint. I was thankful to place her in a dark corner of the coach where her tears might fall unseen, while I myself mounted on the top. We started immediately, and many a troubled, distracted thought was mine, travelling under these flying clouds and gleams of stormy moonlight. My brother! my brother! my poor unworthy Jamie! my heart sobbed over him in silence, as Sibby's did. To me, the pang of personal wrong and miserable unrequited devotion was wanting; but Jamie was the darling of our house, dear to me as to a sister; and very hard and terrible, haunting me like a spectre, was this

bitter knowledge I had gained of Jamie's unsuspected hardness of heart.

When we came to Moulisburgh, I assisted Sybil to alight; and holding her hand tightly in mine, guided her to the Ailieford road. Sybil's pride made no ungentle opposition; she was worn out, homeless and friendless, yearning as only the forlorn can, for rest and womanly comfort, and I saw that even I had a command over her, by right of the natural kindness which no one else offered to her distress. Three miles—three long, slow, weary miles, through dark roads and under naked trees, with Sybil's weary frame, and sinking heart, and my anxiety and pain for her and Jamie, and for my poor mother, on whom the news would fall like a thunder-bolt —it was a sad going home.

"I'm no blaming Jamie, mind," said Sybil, half under her breath, as if concluding audibly a long reverie; "and dinna tell his mother to vex her, Willie—for I've never been

happy a' my days—I never knew what it was—and what right have I to look for it now?"

Unspeakably pitiful these words were to me—alas for the youth whose sun was clouded so sadly!—and to me, myself so inexperienced, the certain revulsion which should follow was not visible. I was lost and swallowed up like herself in the misery of the moment.

At Ailieford they were preparing for their quiet rest, untroubled with thought of our anguishes. The kitchen window was dark, though the door had been left on the latch for my father, who had not yet returned. The sound with which I opened it seemed to rouse Sibby; she started back, tried to withdraw her hand from my arm, and repeated her, "No, no."

"Come, we are at home now," said I; and I drew her within the threshold.

"Is that you, Robert?" said my mother,

appearing with her candle in the passage which connected kitchen and parlour. "Bless me, Willie Mitchell! what brings ye here at this time? Mary, my dear, is it you?"

I saw the deep flush on Sybil's very neck as she turned back, away from my mother, and towards me. My mother advanced to us with suspicious eyes, holding her candle forward in keen examination.

"Willie, what is the meaning of this?"

"Mother, I come to you from Jamie," said I hurriedly, making impatient signs to her, which she could not understand. "Jamie has taken a great step out of our knowledge, mother, and it would be cruel to Sybilla to lose time in telling it, though it may be cruel to startle you with it, at once and unprepared. Mother, Jamie has been married for six months, and our poor Sibby Wood is his wife."

My mother recoiled from us a few steps, and cried, "Lord bless me! the laddie, the

laddie!" in a voice which made Sybil shrink and crouch, as if to hide herself. I could hardly restrain in mine the hot hand which writhed in my hold. I did it with a cruel grasp, conscious, more than Sibby was, of the pain I inflicted, and with the other hand I made a fierce imperious gesture—almost the sole act of irreverence my conscience accuses me of to my mother—demanding attention to this poor stricken heart, wronged and neglected, crouching at my side.

"Let me go, Willie," cried Sybil, shrilly, struggling with me. "I never wanted to come here; his mother thinks it's me—it's me. Oh, let me go. I'll hide among the woods, or get shelter someway. Will you let me go? for I'll no be hunted down, and killed here—not here—let me die my lane."

And, her voice rising to a broken scream, interrupted with convulsive sobs, she fought with me in blind passion. This was the climax of all, and she could bear no more.

I do not know how the next five minutes passed; I am only conscious that at the end of them, my mother was holding the poor girl, now wildly weeping and moaning aloud, past all self-restraint, half forcibly in her arms; and that thus she was partly led, partly carried into the parlour, and placed in my father's arm-chair before the declining fire.

But Sibby would not rest there; she started up again, and threw herself on the ground at my mother's feet, hiding her face in the skirts of her gown, and letting the flood pour forth unrestrained. Loud, strong, involuntary sobs, stifling her very breath; convulsions of the heaving breast, over which she folded her arms tightly to keep down the force which was not to be controlled. I looked on in distress and awe—almost fear. I never saw emotions so violent and terrible.

CHAPTER XV.

"AND so Jamie is married!"

My father said it with peevish annoyance as he lighted his candle. In his way, this father of ours was kindly enough, and had sympathies, when you could get at them. Enough of generosity, too, strongly encrusted and embedded in a nature full of self-regard, to put us above all fear of any unkindly reception on his part of poor Sibby a dependant. In the meantime, however, the prominent matter of the whole was, the annoyance it gave himself. He

had been sitting in his arm-chair, taking his sleeping draught of toddy, and crying "Humph!" with suppressed anger and petulance. My father seemed to think somebody could have prevented this, and that it was done of set purpose to annoy him.

"Now, don't you keep your mother up out of her bed to make things worse, Willie," said my father; "you can say what you have to say in the morning, instead of keeping the whole house out of their rest."

And so, with humphs and shakes of the head, he went away.

My mother was with Sibby, putting her to bed like a child, and by-and-bye she came down to me with her face full of pity and compassion. The fire had been improved a little, but was still low, and the general aspect of the room was melancholy and dingy. The kettle, brought from the cosy, "gathered" kitchen fire, where there was always a glow, had gone sullenly "off

the boil," and I sat brooding over the table, compounding in the tea-cup which she always used, my mother's evening draught. Poor, weary, fainting Sibby had been constrained to take some of the universal beverage too, to make her sleep; and having seen her safely in bed, and gradually sinking into rest, my mother descended to discuss the circumstances with me.

"I'm feared—I'm very feared," said my mother, as she sat down opposite me, "that Jamie has not behaved well to that poor thing. Such a day as she must have had, Willie—walking to Edinburgh first, then wandering about seeking you, then seeing Jamie, and then out here to Ailieford, no to speak of the distress and trouble; poor thing! if thae young creatures would but take thought, and could see what they're venturing on! And so Jamie bade you bring her home to his mother—poor laddie! But you must see if it's no possible to get a decent place

for him, Willie, where he can keep his wife, and have a house of his ain."

Keep his wife, and have a house of his own!—do what Mary would not trust me to do! The words recalled my thoughts to myself with bitterness; but even my mother was thinking of Jamie, not of me—it was a foreshadowing of my fate.

"But why could he not come himself?" continued my mother. "Would it not have been wiser-like to have brought his wife home himself? It breaks my heart to say it, Willie, but I'm doubtful of Jamie; though to be sure he might be feared to meet us all, poor man. Poor laddie! I'm no complaining of Sibby, Willie, but still—"

"Hush, mother," said I, somewhat impatiently interrupting the infallible motherly caveat against the complete suitability of the son's wife; "know first what poor Sibby has borne this very night before you say a word about her."

And I told with some irritation the meeting I had seen—the cruel carelessness, the anger, and last of all, how Jamie had left Sybil alone in the street to find her way as she could to the home which now was only a name, while he himself joined his friends. My mother listened to me with clasped hands and a moved face — interrupting me sometimes with bitter exclamations, "A son of mine!—a son of mine!"

"I have heard of such things, Willie," said my mother, when I had ended, "I have kent such things—maybe in my own person —but that Jamie should do them—*Jamie!* a bairn of mine!"

"Do not let Sibby know I have told you, mother," said I; "she begged me not to do it; and it's no comfort to her to blame Jamie —I feel that too myself."

Yet my mother, who had the best right, did not blame Jamie; but her mourning and bitterness over him, though I myself

joined in it, every word, was inexpressibly painful to me. I understood Sybil now—understood my mother's own impatience on many a previous occasion when I, instead of defending Jamie, as was my usual part, joined her in censuring him. Each of us could ourselves own his faults and condemn them; but we could not bear to hear the same condemnation from any voice but our own.

When I left the house next morning before daybreak, my mother coming downstairs on tiptoe from a final visit to Sybil's room, told me she was still sleeping soundly in comfort and peace, and gave me a message to Jamie, bidding him come out with all haste, to comfort and make reconciliation with his wife. Thus charged, and receiving for my own part a more than usual share of my mother's tender affectionateness, I went away, lightened, yet deeply moved, to my business, and to Edinburgh.

Passing Dr. Burnet's chill roadside house, I paused to look up at its windows. Mary, always early astir, was looking out, with a face as pale and wistful as itself, upon the grey dawn in the sky. Seeing me, she came to the door with a little surprise and haste, which brought some reviving colour to her cheek.

I told her briefly my story of Sybil, and she confided to me her anxieties about her father. He was very ill, and had a doctor attending him now; and Mary feared the end was near at hand.

Another moment, and we had parted. Too anxious to rest, and fearful of breaking the heavy disturbed morning sleep into which her father had fallen, poor Mary resumed her melancholy place at the window, to watch the pale light growing in the east; and I went upon my way, full of chill disheartening thoughts. Was it my fate then to be always a spectator—always looking on passive and

powerless, while those dearest to me passed through the flood and fire? It almost seemed so, as I passed thus out of one calamity to the borders of another—and my heart grew cold and faltered with prophetic fear.

CHAPTER XVI.

REACHING the office at nine o'clock, and beginning, without any great vocation for it, to my work, I heard that my brother had already been seeking me there. It was quite natural that my very unusual absence should alarm even Jamie—but I was glad to hear he had made inquiry for me. We had lived a good deal apart of late—for Jamie would not care for my society, and I could not cultivate the heterogeneous mass of acquaintances which encumbered his.

In the forenoon he came to me, with a

face full of agitation, his eyes unsteady and bloodshot, his dress carelessly arranged—his whole appearance changed.

"Where were you last night, Willie?" exclaimed my brother. "I have a perfect nightmare on me still. Come out and speak to me."

Indulgent Mr. Middleton never had any objections. I went.

"I was at home, Jamie," said I, briefly.

"At home? Something happened to me last night," cried Jamie. "I can scarcely know yet whether it was real or only a dream, I was out—I believe you're right, Willie—I *should* be better in the house, many a time, than among these fellows: and Sibby came to me—came and asked me out to the street to speak to her. I was angry and hasty—I believe I spoke harshly. Poor Sibby! Man, Willie, I mind now I never told you that—I never told you about Sibby and me."

"You can tell me after: quick now, Jamie, what about last night?"

"She said something about having no place to go to. I think I was possessed. I did not believe her; and at last I let her go away, and went in again myself. I had not parted with her two minutes, when I could have shot myself for it; but instead of following her, I began drinking to drown it. I'll never taste again—I vow to you, Willie—"

"Hush!" said I, laying my hand upon his arm. "Quiet, Jamie, people will notice you. But what about her?"

"What about her! Nothing that I know!" said Jamie, wildly. "I let her go away by herself, like a beast as I was. I think I was mad—I think I was distracted! Man, Willie, let me alone! If any scathe has happened to Sibby, what's to come of me? I darena look at the very skies for thinking of her. And me to let her go

away, and not a friend but myself in the world!"

I drew him into a solitary side street, where there was no one to see his agitation.

"Be quiet, Jamie!" said I. "I took her home to my mother last night. She's safe and well at Ailieford."

Poor Jamie! He plunged his arm through mine, made two or three vain efforts to contain himself, and then burst into tears. The relief was so unexpected—so instantaneous—it brought the old spring to his step and light to his eye.

"Are you sure she's safe? Are you sure she's at home? Poor Sibby—poor Sibby! I might have been her death, Willie, if it had not been for you!"

He ran on incoherently in this way for some time. The influence of last night's wild dissipation was scarcely yet exhausted, and Jamie was greatly excited.

"But it vexed us all sorely, Jamie," said I, "to think you could treat poor Sibby so —poor Sibby! so young a wife."

He hung his head with genuine shame. "Man, I never would—I never could—if I had only been myself!"

"But why were you not yourself?" said I. "Would you say that to my mother, Jamie?—a lad like you wasting everything, destroying your own self, breaking folks' hearts! Man, I'm sure it can be no pleasure after all!"

"Neither it is," said Jamie, after a long pause. "It may be a kind of pleasure at first; but when you begin to feel that you're past the lawful length, then it's nothing but madness—just to get on, further and further as if you were running a race—just to get quit of yourself, and make the man within you that keeps aye crying 'Stop'—blind and powerless—that's what it is! I tell you it's nothing but madness, Willie; but I'll never

enter a place of the kind again. I'll never taste the miserable stuff again—never I tell you, if I should live a hundred years!"

I was only a boy like himself. My heart overflowed to him in his furious repentance. We held each other's hands, and tears were in both our eyes. I could have wept aloud for very joy as Jamie vehemently repeated his vow.

Heaven knows I was no sceptic—I believed it, and rejoiced over him with a full heart, as one who had been lost and was found. Poor fellow, he himself was greatly moved: and when we had to part at last, we parted with trembling, excited affectionateness. I had just delivered my mother's message to him, and we parted with the understanding that he should go direct from the warehouse home.

I myself had no small ordeal to go through when I entered Mrs. Cockburn's parlour at my usual hour. Geordie's keen'

inquisitive scrutiny—her mother's half-angry suspicious looks, and audible marvellings—not to speak of little Bell's direct malicious inquiry and screams of provoking laughter—but I thought it best to make a direct explanation without delay.

"It was my brother's wife," said I, "and I was obliged to return home with her at once. I was wanted at Ailieford."

"Willie Mitchell, my man, it's no like you to say what's no true," said Mrs. Cockburn, indignantly. "Ae ill aye leads to anither—if bairns but kent—it aye lies in the beginning. Here's this lad, as decent a lad as need to be, till he's fa'en in wi' some ill creature leading him out of the right way. Wae's me—and it comes like natural to tell lees to cover it. I'm meaning nae ill to onybody—I'm no reproaching a creature in particular—but it's an awfu' world. Ance begin, and there's nae saying what you may come to."

At first, the good woman looked with severe virtue in my face, but her eyes wandered as her speech flowed into the usual abstract current. Not so Geordie. A visible paleness gradually grew over the grey neutral tints of her face—for poor Geordie had little complexion to boast of at any time—and she kept her eyes on me with earnest pertinacity. Geordie had an interest in this, and a consequent insight, greater than her mother.

"I mean my brother Jamie's wife," I said, quickly. "It is but a little time since we knew. Jamie is married."

"Bless me!" cried Mrs. Cockburn, for once startled into brevity. But Geordie uttered no exclamation. I only knew of her violent start by the sudden motion of the table on which her hand rested. In another moment, she had resumed her work. The paleness was still upon her face, making the lines of her mouth look stern and rigid, and

pinching the cheek into meagre thinness; and Geordie's brow was gathered into heavy folds, frowning darkly over the ribbons on her knee. Her foot patted unconsciously upon the floor; her whole face gloomed forth defiance. When she rose, she threw about her own materials, and pushed the familiar furniture from her path with passionate violence. I was not surprised that the proud mortification and disappointment of the solitary girl should thus blaze forth into wild resentment and sullenness; and no one else thought of any other reason for it than that Geordie was "in a passion"—it was, unfortunately, not very rare.

Poor Geordie! her heart was moved to its depths in this the commonest and earliest grief of youth; but there was no one there to note the troubling of the waters, or help the sufferer to the following blessing. Not for worlds would Geordie have whispered, even to herself, what it was that struck her,

under this anger, with such a blank and heavy solitude. Alone, and no one with her, no one to comfort her or help; but Geordie shut up herself within herself, and suffered nothing softening or gentle to fall upon her wound. No dews or balms to soothe it into peace, but the scorching iron, self-applied, to work a violent, sudden cure.

"Eh, Sirs, the like o' that!" exclaimed Mrs. Cockburn. "He'll hae gotten some bit puir lassie now wi' a bonnie face for her tocher, and nae mair gear. Weel, I'm no' sayin' ony ill of Jamie Mitchell—I'm never ane to gie a lad an ill-name—but eh Sirs I'm wae for his wife! Such a handfu' for a puir thing new come till't! Maybe, somebody's dauted bairn, the pet lamb in a house. Lord help her! what is she to do with that wild laddie to keep him out of mischief, and to clead him, and fend for him, and keep a house ower his head and her ain? Just to think how mony I've kent in my

day! no to say mysel', and Jessie, my auldest, that has just her ain adoes; some, ye would maistly think, had a' the shifts and ways of weel-doing born wi' them, they take to their lot so easy—but mony a ane has an awfu' fecht—and I ken that by mysel'."

CHAPTER XVII.

JAMIE came back to his business the next morning in high spirits; he had made his peace with Sybil, had satisfied my mother, and saw everything in the brightest point of view. My mother proposed that we should unite our little incomes, take a cheap lodging together, and have Sibby in to Edinburgh to manage our small means for the advantage of both. Jamie could see no drawback to this plan; it was perfect in his eyes, and I was very loth to put obstacles in the way. Still it struck me that they had a singular

tendency to forget that I had any private prospects of my own. I was put aside, not only by my own natural disposition, but by the constant interference of others. No one dreamt that this or that necessity laid upon me was any sacrifice to me—it had to be done, that was all—and as little did I dream, though I felt the wrong vaguely, of defending my own independence by prompt self-assertion, the only thing which could have saved me.

I, who was pondering the possibility of making a home for Mary, if Mary could be persuaded to venture it, on the means which looked so insufficient to her good sense and prudence; but, nevertheless, I suffered myself to be drawn away in Jamie's train to look at little suites of high rooms, looking down as if from hill-tops upon the city and the country, the new town and the sea.

And it seems to me now, that almost in

less time than I take to tell it, we were settled in a little set of these lofty apartments. The locality was a court, or little close street shut in on either side, behind the Canongate; and from our airy windows we could catch a glimpse of the grey peaks of Holyrood, and the slopes, looking gigantic in the nightly darkness which descended on them like a mantle, of Arthur's Seat behind. We had but two rooms—one of them sacredly and exclusively mine—the other, the larger of the two, dignified by a recess wherein a bed was half-concealed, and with two windows—was Jamie's, and the general sitting-room. This large room was of very good size, and as light and cheerful as near vicinity to the skies could make it, while the very moderate rent at once decided us. We gave up our little den at Mrs. Cockburn's, and on a November Monday, Jamie ordained that we should go "home."

I did not contradict him, nor resist in any

way, nor whisper a word to any one indeed about my own hopes of a home too, distinct and individual. In the meantime, my mother's whole attention was absorbed in Jamie's house, and Jamie's wife, and Jamie's "settlement." Ay, young people, you may smile; but had Jamie been carrying his wife home to a palace, it would scarcely have been so decided and unquestionable a *beginning* as was this room in the South Back of the Canongate. To my mother it was "settling in life;" and I, a dreary unit, ceased to be thought of in the little bustle, which tended Jamie's "going home."

He himself was full of boyish elation, triumphant and self-important; and I suppose this feeling reached to myself also, at the time, impressible as I was. I remember very well and clearly—as indeed I do everything that happened in those days—that going home. The night was a Monday night in November; and I, discoursing with

many thoughts, crossed the North Bridge rapidly in the new direction, turning my back upon Mrs. Cockburn's dusky parlour, and smouldering fire. My face now was towards the old town, dimly revealing itself in all its points and peaks through the brown haze which hung low upon the frosty horizon. The valley underneath lay dark and silent, here and there gleaming with a minute star of light, which had not power enough to reveal anything but itself and the gloom; and the great high old houses on the ascent before me, trembled all over with faint lights, irregularly scattered among the rows of windows which all day long watched the new town, like so many sullen eyes of Argus, spying upon the careless levity of the hope and youth below. The streets had all their usual crowd and din, all their usual cheerful consciousness of people who came there for love of them, and not for mechanical calls of necessity. A kind of neigh-

bourliness and brisk enjoyment was in the lighted windows, the groups of faces pausing to look in, and all the animation of sound and motion which defied the bracing, cheery cold in the night-air. Then came the Canongate, gleaming too with its low windows, and descending doorways, its lintels black with age and decay, all traced with lingering sculpture; its little sign-boards hung out from windows coroneted; its flutter of faded garments here and there at a dim shop-door where trade in such went on stealthily; and, above all, its high line of noble houses, rising up dark, as if with stern upbraiding for their altered fate, to shut out the wintry sky. Light and sound—nay, din itself, and the blaze of some windows among those quieter trades, ones, where the artificial glow without tempts squalid loungers to the artificial excitement within—are not sufficient to disturb the blackness of shadow in all these nooks and corners, nor the supreme immoveable silence with

which these dark old roofs erect themselves to the sky.

Diving myself into an entry black as midnight, I reached our own particular close, and mounting the long unlighted stair, got admission at our new landlady's door. I had scarcely crossed the threshold, when the door of Jamie's room was thrown wide open to receive me, by the delighted hand of Jamie himself. Throned in the warm glow of light within, was my mother, seated in an arm-chair by the fireside, and Sybil stood before the table, satisfying herself that the tea, which they had only waited my arrival to begin to, was sufficiently "masked." The firelight entirely drowned in its warm radiance the light of the candle on the table, and dancing about the room with a thousand fairy bends and quiverings, rioted in every shining surface it could find out; in the dark panes of the windows, which were already blinking on us like so

many merry, unsteady eyes; in the little looking-glass on the top of the chest of drawers; in the new white metal tea-pot, and clear blue cups and saucers, and shining brass candlestick on the table. I myself got a gleam of it in my brass buttons; and it filled the room in every corner with the cheeriest penetration.

The room itself had for its furniture the before mentioned arm-chair, and half-a-dozen correspondent ones without arms, a square table standing before the fire-place, and an old-fashioned oblong one in the recess of one of the windows; the carpet only covered the centre of the room, leaving a broad margin of white well-scoured deals on every side; and behind my mother was an old settee, well-known to all frequenters of the kitchen at Ailieford, but resplendent in a new cover of "furniture print," and receiving many a proud affectionate glance from my mother's own kindly eyes. There was a

curtain, too, drawn quite across the recess, concealing it; and to our imaginations, easily satisfied and unluxurious, the room was a very paragon of rooms.

"May-be not to be compared with our own parlour," said my mother, "but that is not to be expected, Sibby, my dear, and I would say this was fully lightsomer than Ailieford. You see, Willie, I thought, now that Andrew's settled and Jamie's settled, and you a man come to years, that there was little need to keep the settee in the kitchen just for Marget—so we took two or three afternoons, Sibby and me, and stuffed a new cushion with fine fresh moss, and made the covers; and you would hardly ken it again."

Jamie was drawing forward heavily, for its sturdy wooden stumps were innocent of castors, this important piece of furniture, and we two sat down upon it, rejoicing in

the soft elastic moss which had made beds for us before now.

"We've begun to gather, Willie," said Sybil, looking up to me with a happy colour on her face. "The teapot and the cups are mine too—I got them from your mother to-day; and here, see—I did not let you see it either, Jamie—my aunt herself sent me this table-cloth to-day."

Sybil's cheeks crimsoned over with gratification and shy pride. It was only a humble piece of napery; but it was an acknowledgment of wrong done and pardon asked, worth a hundred times its value to Jamie's young wife; and in this household, with its very small beginning, the mere value was prized too.

"And Sibby, my woman, you'll just take an opportunity any odd time when you can get it, and buy bits of things when you're able," said my mother. "If you had a

carpet here now of your own, I would say your room was furnished; and I've no fear of you, my dear."

"There is many a one makes a worse beginning, mother," said Jamie, looking round somewhat proudly.

"Ay, Jamie," answered my mother, with some emphasis, "but mind you what a man has, is little matter either to his wife or his living, in comparison with what he is. No doubt it's the wife that makes the house when a's done; but unless the man has a heart to his work, and brings in all he can to her, and strives as weel as herself, a woman has a bondage on her, and may toil all her days, and never do anything worth speaking of. So mind you, you're no to be content and leave the room as it is, and look to Sibby's thrift to make the siller spread. You'll have to make more siller, Jamie, and work for your wife like a man."

Like a man! The tears sprang to Jamie's

bright affectionate eyes—he could not answer for a moment; and then his low-spoken "So I will, mother, so I will," came from the depths of his heart.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AFTER this "settling" of my brother's, I myself felt in no inconsiderable degree the sedative effects of being settled too. Dr. Burnet's disease, lulling out of its paroxysms into more ordinary illness, continued to occupy all Mary's thoughts and time, but no fatal result seemed imminent, and I was left, until the next wave should come, peacefully stranded upon this little beach, with no active share in anything, and from day to day putting off my resolution to "make the chance" which should bring me fortune.

And gradual habits formed upon me in this interval, habits of unremarking observation, of quiet side reflections, known only to myself, and of the spectatorship which has marked all my life since then. The one supernumerary person in the household, it was to me that Sybil brought her small tribulations, her confidential ponderings over our scanty income, her plans to make both ends meet; it was I, when Jamie, still only too easily "led away," distressed us both now and then, with little outbreaks which pinched us for a following week or two, who lectured or excused, soothed or condemned, as the occasion warranted. I had little time indeed to occupy myself with concerns of my own; these two young inexperienced hearts, just beginning to find out problems in themselves and in each other—with all their points of contact and collision still unassimilated—with the natural opposition of habits, partialities, modes of thinking, which after all,

my young friend, not even love itself suffices alone to trim into uniformity—gave my leisure full employment, not without frequent experience of the "redding straik" which is the natural portion of peacemakers.

The winter passed over us with quiet monotony, only broken by one or two backslidings of Jamie. He was very fond, as people say, of his young wife, and very fain to procure little indulgences for her, but these were out of his reach, and Jamie was compelled to content himself with thoughts of what he would do if he could. He was very liberal certainly in this imaginary kindness, and I believe poor Sybil had a gratification in Jamie's hypothetical liberality, which real gifts would never have given her; but in the meantime she had sundry privations to endure which Jamie's eye did not perceive so clearly as it did the unattainable luxuries with which he longed to please her. The young wife was her own sole attendant, and

managed all the little drudgery of our household herself, and there was to me a singular pleasure in observing how Sybil's maiden meditations, her unsophisticated dreams of romance, gave way so gently to the humble, limited, restrained necessities of the narrow lot which had fallen to her share. From the drudgeries of her girlhood, the sordid occupations laid upon her by hands of others, her proud rebelling spirit had leaped away wildly into fantasy and dream—speculations on dazzling possibilities, and wild thoughts of what herself might be, when herself entered independent into the charmed world of life. And Sybil's unconscious, natural grandeur of appearance, her almost beauty, lofty and spiritual, seemed to mark her as one destined for another than the usual lot. Out of all this—out of the vague magnificence of these girlish dreams, the wild young heart sprang suddenly into a sea of real troubles, and when the momentary shame was over, the

cruelty repented of, they all subsided into the daily frugalities of our little establishment —the homeliest labours, the most contracted means—with no longer even an undiscovered world to flee to in the future—no longer a possible left to make up for all the hardships of the oppressed youth. The future now, sober in its grey morning mists, lay stretched before her, a landscape of long level lines, where nothing akin to greatness could possibly come, unless it was the undesirable greatness of affliction. Yet there must be something of satisfaction and involuntary contentment in having accomplished and decided one's own fate. I saw all her little cares grow upon Sybil with the sweet familiarity of use and wont. Cares they were, and very narrow ones—sometimes even biting and painful enough; but they were her own—and she, whose proud young head had lifted itself so loftily, aspiring to regions of emotion far above the common-place love-

makings, flirtations, marryings, of our little rural world, and even whose childish dreams had been of fairy palaces, of knights and ladies of romance—always of something imaginative, refined and high—she, poor Sybil, began to have long half gossiping talks over the fire with my mother, who came not unfrequently to see us, consultations about little bits of homely furniture, plans of making and mending, long deliberations over shapes and patterns, talks which I believe were reckoned amongst the most enjoyable moments of Sybil's sober life.

Standing by the window, I myself, looking out, see the visible darkness gather on the great slope of Arthur's Seat—darkness of a spring night, sweet and gentle, gradually rising over the indistinct ruin of St. Anthony's chapel, and tearing aside like some gossamer silken fabric as it tries in vain to cover the rugged ridge yonder, boldly break through it, of Salisbury Craigs. Down at

our feet a quiet country-looking street goes towards traditionary Croftangry, and the Abbey hill—and yonder, stealing away into the darkness lie the sloping roads and fields, and grey houses—Dumbie Dykes, undistinguished among them, if I could but point it out—which link the environs of the Royal Town to the fertile lands of Lothian, its own fair shire and province. So is the prospect without; within you can scarcely see by the glimmering firelight, our much prized carpet standing out dark and warm from its broad margin of white boards; our square table lighted with faint reflections from its tea-tray; our settee, a little faded in the glory of its new covers, withdrawing itself somewhat sullenly in the shadow; and in the arm-chair, my mother, her grey hair parted on her forehead, her snowy net cap closely plaited about her face—that fresh, clear, comely face, which cannot choose but throw a home-light out of it wherever it may be; and opposite her,

bending forward from the low wooden chair, which distinguishes its hard upright back so clearly from the slope of her shoulders, Sybil, with her unconsidered grace of attitude, her unconscious, subdued stateliness of mien; mistress and ruler; but of no palace—only of this little homely fire-lighted room.

I am not sharing in their conversation; but see what smiles and pleasant flushes come and go upon the pale young cheek, which scarcely ever brightened before with the easy light-heartedness of youth—and see the interest in my mother's face, gravely listening, now giving counsel with lifted finger and slightly shaken head, now brightening into distinct and full approbation. It is, in truth, a very trifling matter, this new twenty shillings-worth of "plenishing" which Sybil thinks she can afford to buy—verily, good gentleman, not worth half a moment's thought to you; but my heart warms in my solitude when I think of that fireside picture—of my

mother's lively interest, and Sybil's little excitement of expectation—few things I see now, let them be ever so beautiful, charm me like the remembrance of that one home scene.

The day following, I went dutifully with my mother to share in the civility of a call on Mrs. Cockburn. We had not so long a stair to ascend, and the house was in every respect more dignified; but the atmosphere of the parlour oppressed us, as it never did me before. It was a heavy, leaden afternoon, without any distinct qualities, with a brooding warmth in its own drooping air, very like the dark, red, dusty fire which always smouldered in Mrs. Cockburn's grate. By the window, grey, pale, and sullen, sat Geordie, her forehead lowering with its darkest "gloom," and her head stooped obstinately over her lap. On the chair before her, the bright materials of her work —pleasant coloured silks and glistening ribbons—lay in a little heap, and I saw her

put down pettishly by her side as we entered, a much worn volume—just such a one as I used to tantalize her with in my old thoughtless boyish days. Sullenly heart-broken, prematurely world-estranged and weary, Geordie was trying this mode of escape from the every day reality which pressed so heavily upon her.

And in all the house we heard no echo of Mrs. Cockburn's voice. The stillness seemed preternatural to me, unbroken as it was by anything but the heavy fall now and then of ashes from the choked fire.

"I'll tell my mother," said Geordie, rising, and I thought I saw a tear melt over the defiant glow in her eye.

Then we heard a little bustle in the adjacent bed-room. "Will she be ill, poor body?" said my mother to herself and me. I had known the family too long, all its habits and uses, to be indifferent to this singular change in them: and I waited the

appearance of my old landlady with almost the anxiety of affection.

By-and-bye, Mrs. Cockburn came in, her sandy hair ruffled on her forehead, her cap hurriedly adjusted over it, her eyes red with weeping. Sullen, with her drooped head and glooming forehead, came Geordie behind her mother. Mrs. Cockburn put up the corner of her little shawl to her eye, as she hurriedly touched my mother's hand, and mine, and sat down disconsolately in a chair. Geordie, with feverish impatience, cast herself into her own particular seat, and began to turn over her work and seek for the lost needle and missing thimble.

"'Deed I'm scarce fit to see onybody the day," said Mrs. Cockburn, with a little sob, "though I take it very kind of you calling, Mrs. Mitchell, now that the laddies have set up for themselves; but you'll no have heard what's befallen us. Oh, thae wild laddies winning up to be men, what an awfu' hand-

ful they are! My son Tam, Mrs. Mitchell, my auldest, that was just like the darlin' of the house a' his days, and as well ta'en care of, and as muckle made of, as might have served a lady, let alone a stout young man—he's gaen away, puir, silly, infatuated callant, and gotten himsel married! We just heard yesterday; but when it happened itsel I canna just tell; and the warst o't a' is, that we're awfu' feared she's nae better than she should be. Oh, Mrs. Mitchell, my puir, weirdless laddie Tam! what's to come of him now?"

"Mother, whisht!" cried Geordie, fiercely.

"Ye see," said Mrs. Cockburn, nervously wiping her tears and turning to a new feature of the question, "Geordie there, she's next to Tam, and has aye had an awfu' wark with him, and though she's as broken-hearted as me about this, yet she'll no let me say a word against the woman, because she's Tam's wife; and I wouldna say either," added the

poor mother, gliding into her usual consolatory reverie, and into the passive benevolence of her more ordinary thoughts, "that she was just worthy of all the ill names I've gi'en her mysel; but 'deed, ane gets just a kind of satisfaction out of misca'ing such folk, that ane kens has led away puir silly callants to their destruction. Pity me, Geordie, dinna gie such awfu' looks! I dinna ken what to say, or what to think mysel', I'm sure, for whase fault it may be, or whether he mayna be farther than her in the transgression it's no in my power to ken; but ane canna abuse ane's ain son, and wha's to stand up for my puir Tam if it's no me."

And Mrs. Cockburn's soliloquy was drowned in a little fretful burst of tears, which neither the corner of the shawl nor the hem of the apron, both hastily lifted to her eyes, could conceal.

"Things never turn out so ill as folk expect at the first dinnle of the news," said

my mother, soothingly, "I was like to break my heart myself when I heard of my Jamie; but I'm nothing like so ill-pleased now, Mrs. Cockburn, and he's gotten an innocent young creature for a wife, that so far as I can see will do him nothing but good; though, to tell the truth, when I heard it first, I could have found in my heart to misca' her as much as you."

Looking up hastily from her work, Geordie gave my mother a sidelong scowl, and I saw her hand tremble with impatience, and a roll of ribbons which she held was dashed to the ground with sudden passion. Alas, poor Geordie! in her grief she was furious at the world, furious at her fate.

"But you see I'm very lonely at Ailieford. I've no girls at home to comfort me," said my mother, with a pathetic tone in her voice, which sent my thoughts back in a moment to my little sister's grave, "and, my woman, *you'll* be a great comfort to your mother."

"Me?"

The direct emphasis of this unexpected appeal startled Geordie out of her gloom of savage sullenness. The blood flushed to her face with overpowering force, and she fixed her eyes, lurid and defiant as they were, upon my mother. "Me—me a comfort to anybody —me?"

Poor Mrs. Cockburn was startled too, and hastened to interpose, still all discomposed and unsteady, between the visitor to whom she was anxious to show respectful civility and the passionate daughter before whom her own passive spirit trembled.

"And so she would," said the poor woman, nervously, "so she would, as you say, if she didna take it sae sair to heart hersel; but I sometimes think I have nae feeling, for a' I am his mother, in comparison of Geordie. I'm sure if ever a poor woman wanted comfort it's me," continued Mrs. Cockburn, melting again into tears, "for ye

see there's Jessie, my auldest, fechting wi' a man and a house of her ain, and Bell naething but a bairn, and Peter a wild, steering laddie, just come to years to be fit for mischief, so that if I was to get comfort from ony of them, it bid to be from Tam or Geordie; but Tam's ga'en and grieved me sairest of a', and Geordie's that muckle put about, that it's me that has to comfort her; and I can never say a word to my man," said the disconsolate mother, fairly breaking down as she reached this climax, "if it wasna on Sabbaths, when he's himsel, and what would be the gude of vexing him then."

My mother was not influenced by vague purposes of doing good; herself too humble a woman by far, with all her little prides and dignities, to think of preaching to others, I cannot tell what influenced her to return again to the direct personal address which had so startled Geordie.

"I lost my little lassie—the only one I

ever had," said my mother, turning her face towards the reluctantly attracted countenance of Geordie; "and many a time I think sitting yonder in Ailieford my lane, that I would have thought little of my troubles, if I had keepit little Mary to comfort me. My dear, you'll be a great consolation to your mother!"

Turning away, Geordie began hastily to pick up her scattered ribbons; and I saw some tears fall among them, which, with a faltering unsteady hand, she wiped away; but the savage nature was banished from Geordie's soul.

"Do you mind what you said to me about them being young men, and that it was not to be expected they should care for home?" she said to me with a certain subdued bitterness in her tone as we went away; "do you mind, Willie?—and what we tried to do, my mother and me, to wile them in at night? My mother's very good—better than folk think;

though I never thought *I* could be a comfort to onybody. But they're a' gaen now, Willie; will they think mair of hame, when it is their ain?"

I looked, half shuddering, to see if there was anything malign in Geordie's face. No —a gentler melancholy than I had ever seen there, was softening the grey pallid lines of mouth and cheek. Disappointed, embittered, cast aside, it was something like a new life to Geordie to be able to think of her own unlovely and neglected self as a "comfort" or an influence at all.

But my heart echoed with a vague misery of foreboding at her parting question. I did not attempt to answer, nor even to give myself a reason for my start of fear; but it thrilled me with a strange, vivid reality of dread, to have the haunting terror of my own heart echoed by a stranger's voice.

CHAPTER XIX.

MARY! Mary! does some one think that my heart forgets you, standing thus as it does among the affairs of others? If I had been able for this, or could have let my emotions fade into indifference, it might have been well for me now—if that, indeed, was not in any case a vain way of talking; but I could not. Mary went with me where I went, a conscious presence. All day long, I dreamed myself into her immediate society, beheld her in those humble offices which fell so strangely upon Sybil, discharging her

natural functions, with no less, though a very different grace. Excited into annoyance, or perhaps even a more serious feeling than annoyance, when the young household of us, sitting by the fire on our long winter evenings came to one of those inevitable collisions which even care and foresight could not quite prevent—there came beaming upon me like a star out of a cloud this same household face, with its frank composure and steadiness, its calm lines and inexcitable temperament; and quiet came to the disturbance and riot in my heart. It was not only that Mary had still been spared the ordeal of daily and constant companionship, and that the romance of ideal love waited on her every step. These had some power, doubtless; but even imagination never laid on Mary's head other than a sober glory. She was not an angel, a divinity, a creature meet for poetry and dreams; she was only the household woman, the house ruler and mistress; but the thought

that she was so, surrounded me with a continual atmosphere of content.

My poor sister Sybil! do you think I despise you, bending there over your homely implements, the needle and the shears which your own instinctive sense has brought you to see are no ignoble tools, for the flutter of hot enthusiasm which lights your cheek, the hasty, unrestrained opinion which has been startled from your tongue. No, poor child; in these old days you were a woman, thinking yourself even older than I; now I look back upon all the latent nobilities which might have ripened into heroic growth—upon all the involuntary, uncertain flashes of high sentiment and aspiration—and know you only a child, my poor, sweet Sybil!—only a glorious, shipwrecked child!

But Mary stands secure upon her quiet eminence, the ground distinct under her foot, the sky above her, clouded it may be, but always definite and clearly visible, with

no visionary glory on it, but only the light of common day. I do not suffer myself to be conscious of experiences unknown to Mary; but I feel at all times that Mary has passed through phases of experience unknown to me—that she is wiser, steadier, more secure than I am; and as I feel this, I glory and have pride in it—Mary is mine!

The spring began to come again slowly. Sabbath after Sabbath, on my home visits, I found the buds swelling, the air growing sunny, the sky soft. I was the only one now who returned home on Saturday night, and there grew between my mother and me a something added to the natural strong affection which bound all her children to her. It was a kind of tender, confidential friendship —I think the most consolatory and sanctifying emotion I have ever known. On the Saturday nights before my father's return—at the quiet preliminary hour on Sabbath mornings, before he had come down to breakfast, long

conversations, full of loving family interest took place between my mother and me. She told me of Andrew, his household, and his prosperity; I made report of Jamie and his. A stranger might have thought us unindulgent, harsh, even severe, to have heard how we spoke of them sometimes; in heart we were so conscious of the most unbounded regard and interest, that we could venture on freedom of speech.

One day in March, we sat together by the parlour fireside. Without, everything was bleak, dry, dusty, and silent. To me, just then suffering from some depression of my own, a blank, drowsy afternoon monotony seeemed to have taken the place of the usual placid Sabbath calm. My father in his arm-chair was audibly sleeping. The fire burned with a certain haziness and slow deliberation; the hearth was not so scrupulously swept as usual. It was somewhat cold, and we had gathered round it in our dark dresses, refusing

to the forlorn red glow in the grate a morsel of reflection; and I think that, light-loving as we all were, the blinds must have been half down that day—the light was so gray, the atmosphere so dim.

My mother sat before the fire with her Bible. I suppose she was reading, or at least, must have been reading half an hour ago; but the book had lain so long quiet in her hand, its leaves unstirred, itself unmoved, that I suspect a reverie had stolen upon the sacred study and stayed it. I myself, unoccupied and dreary, sat in the corner opposite my father. I had nothing to do, and was trying to do nothing. Just returned from an unsuccessful attempt to see Mary, I was a little ill-humoured, if the truth must be told, and had not the smallest amount of sunshine in myself to neutralize the heaviness of the day. Our religious books were but few; and habitual reverence, the education of constant custom, made my conscience in-

capable of contaminating the Sabbath with books of amusement. I sat down, listless and careless—good English friends, do you think a novel might have been quite as harmless as this vacuity? It may be so in this individual case, and many another. Still I am prejudiced to the full extent of my powers in favour of the system, and my shortcomings make no legitimate ground to oppose it on.

My mother mused over her open Bible, my father slept in his arm-chair. Myself lay listlessly in mine, half yielding to the sleepy dimness and quiet in the room, all that was awake of me wandering in thought like a will-o'-the-wisp from subject to subject. The tall wands of the white rose brushed huskily, dry and dusted, against the panes—a loose branch of the pear-tree waved black across the window—within, the hazy fire burned on without a sound; nothing but the heavy breathing of the sleeper, the fainter

sound of our own, was in the air of our quiet room.

I heard the kitchen door open, and with a word to Marget some one entered. My mother looked up a little startled, and putting down her Bible, wondered aloud who could come here at such a time as this. She had scarcely spoken the words, when Mary Burnet looked in upon us.

Her neat dress was as neat as usual, her look, perhaps, only more than usually composed and steady; and if her eyes were a little red, the cold wind without had dried up all her tears. Her lips just parted with a momentary smile of recognition to us as she closed the door behind her.

"My dear, is your father ill?" said my mother, hastily. I had drawn the same conclusion.

"I want to send a letter to my uncle in Glasgow," said Mary; "will you let me write it here? He is sleeping, and I may be ten

minutes away; and then, Willie, maybe you would take it in to Moulisburgh to the post-office. There is no time to lose, but I am sorry to ask you to go so far on such a day."

"Is he so bad, Mary," repeated my mother.

"Doctor Brown says maybe to-night, or at farthest to-morrow," said Mary, steadily, "and it is come to that, that I cannot wish him here longer in his misery and pain. Will you give me some paper, Willie, to write to my uncle? I have not seen him for ten years—he will scarcely mind me—but he might be here by to-morrow night if he got my letter; and by that time I'll be my lane, my lane!"

And Mary's eyes filled with abundant weeping, and her voice faltered; but even in her grief and desolateness was neither spasm nor convulsion. The end was bitter when it came, in spite of long preparation

but her soul knew no agony. She was still collected, steady, sober, competent at once in body and mind.

I offered eagerly to write myself. Mary said no, and took the pen from me quietly. Thus put aside, I looked on as usual. She wrote but a few lines, and when she had done that, gave me the letter to fold. Even then, Mary would not risk doing a thing which she could only do imperfectly. "Mind, it is to a stranger, Willie," she said, with a faint melancholy smile, as her eyes followed the motion of my fingers. Like most people unaccustomed to correspondence, Mary attached no small importance to the external appearance of her letter.

I myself was excited, hasty, and eager; my fingers trembled while they folded, sealed and directed, and I ran with nervous hurry to get my hat. "Shall I go in with you, my dear?" asked my mother, for Mary had risen, ready to go away.

"Willie has forgotten his great-coat," said Mary, "and maybe there is no such hurry; I think I have heard the post time was not till six. When it's after tea-time, Mrs. Mitchell—come and see me then—but I could not get things right for you now. No, you are not to come out without your tea. I can do very well, my lane."

"What about my mother's tea when you are in distress, Mary," cried I, almost wildly, "she must not be left alone at such a dreadful time—mother"—

But Mary interrupted me. "I could get nothing right when we are in such trouble. Come after six, Mrs. Mitchell—just when you are ready without any hurry—but I must go now."

I went with her, carrying over my arm the great-coat which I was too much excited to put on, but I had to steady my hurried, irregular steps to the pace of Mary's. She

walked quickly too, but without a trace of my nervous haste.

She was so quiet, I could scarcely find anything to say to her, except, indeed, assurances that I myself would be back within an hour, and would not leave her, certainly should not leave the house or her immediate vicinity that night.

"You are not to hurry, Willie," was Mary's answer, "you can walk to Moulisburgh in plenty time before the post goes away, and there is no haste coming home; what good could come of sitting up, but just wearying you? No, Willie, no, you're not to do useless things out of kindness, and maybe be ill or worn out yourself when your own work comes in hand."

I saw her into the desolate roadside house, where a faint candle flickering through the closed blind, and the dusty afternoon twilight, marked the window of Dr. Burnet's room,

and just pausing to learn that he was still asleep, I went on at a rapid pace towards Moulisburgh, anxious, yet with a dead pain at my heart. Very true I would be useless sitting down stairs on a solemn watch in Mary's parlour, while she herself waited on the death-bed above; but I thought it might have comforted her even then, to know my heart awake and near her, listening for every echo of her step, and every accent of her voice. It did not, and there was kindness in the wish to spare me unnecessary fatigue and trouble; but with a desolate chill her words fell upon me—useless kindness—alas, that I should never be able for more than this!

Very true, too, that I had abundant time walking at the most quiet pace to reach Moulisburgh before the post hour; and my steps did flag in a kind of silent despair for a few yards after leaving Dr. Burnet's house. But to walk deliberately on such an errand,

consoling myself with having plenty of time, was about as impossible as a flight through the air would have been; by-and-bye my cheek began to flush, my pulse to quicken. Into the great breast of those grey clouds which drooped down out of the sky, heavily closing on the darkening country, I passed with a rapid step. The early darkness closed about me, the dry air blew its sharp atoms into my face. Slowly quivering down like minute white birds with fluttering breast and expanded wings, a few large snow-flakes trembled through the dusky twilight atmosphere, to which their chill white made so marked a contrast. Through the few cottage windows I passed, I could see the household group sitting round the fire in homely comfort and leisure; and throughout the long darkening way, I scarcely met two passengers; universal silence and solitude lay upon the country—the wind was chill, the clouds heavy with a coming snow-storm,

and something wildly melancholy and dismal in the night exaggerated the usual stillness of the Sabbath day.

Coming back, it was still more solemn and lonely—for now the darkness had closed farther in—and the snow came fluttering passively against my cheek, and melted in my breast. Over head the rustling naked boughs seemed each of them possessed with a moaning, whispering, unquiet spirit; and now and then wailing shrieks rose among them as if they beheld somewhere dark down among the brushwood and wintry ditches at their feet, deeds of cruel misery, which broke their quietness into a desperate horror. I had a death-bed before my eyes—the departure of a wild and broken heart present to my fancy—is it wonderful that my own heart leaped and started to every different tone of all these moans and sobs, and shrieks of wailing—and that to my perceptions, this night, so full of melancholy

sound was full of conscious existence too, creatures that made their plaint with inarticulate sighings as they were able. Before me the clouds had risen like a dark curtain, printing in black outline, upon the unearthly paleness of the horizon behind, a ruined tower upon its height. I could have believed it the Master Spirit, the great embodied Ruin sitting apart and waiting for the sinner's death.

CHAPTER XX.

"I SHALL not obstruct you in anything; you cannot find me in your way, Mary; you shall have no trouble with me—but I must wait here."

There was a curve of annoyance on the brow of Mary.

"This is no time for contention," she said, after a pause, "it would be greater kindness to go home and let me think you were getting proper rest, and in comfort—but I'll not say anything now, Willie—wait here since you will. I'll have a fire put on, and there are some books; and you might get

a sleep in the arm-chair, and so feel the watching less; your mother will not leave me either. You are very kind; but, indeed, it only gives me greater grief—I am not easier because you are in discomfort; but sit down, Willie—only you must bid me good-night and let me go."

I sat down—I bade her good-night—and Mary went away. Not the dreary shadow of death drooping over the house—not the heavy rush now and then of snow against the window like the wing of some passing night-bird or wandering spirit, explained the chill of deep depression which fell upon me. These alone might have brought awe and solemnity, but I was cold to the very heart.

The night went on—slow leaden gradual hours. The fire burned faintly beside me, the familiar furniture creeping far away into cold undisturbed corners, or looking with faint trembling reflection upon the dull red

light, seemed like me, tranced in conscious waiting. Now and then stealthy footsteps sounded on the floor overhead, and I was startled sometimes by a groan or loud exclamation wrung from the depth of the fevered sleep in which the dying sufferer lay; but without, the heavy atmosphere was oppressed with a muffled stillness, and still like a dull spectral wing upon the window came the drift of descending snow.

The neighbour who had heartily and willingly offered her services in the earlier night was long ago at rest under her own roof. My mother and Mary alone by the sick-bed, watched the sleeper in profound unbroken silence—and I held my vigil below.

I had drawn the blind softly from the window. White and pallid, giving a certain cold unearthly light to the dim night air through which it glimmered, the snowy waste before me looked like the face of

death. There was still a pale line of sky upon the horizon, still the clear outline of the old castle's remaining tower—nothing else visible or audible of earth or heaven save the gleam of the universal whiteness underneath, and the dark drooping mass of cloud not yet half emptied of its burden. Going back to my seat by the fire, I looked out faintly upon the night. A little breath of cold which seemed to make no disturbance in the atmosphere round me, wandered like a spirit about my cheeks and hands. I felt it on my brow, but my hair was not stirred, and it penetrated like an arrow. My mind began to brood over some pervading spiritual existence—something unseen but present—cold, disembodied, keen as winter wind—and my soul shivered as my frame did. I became impotent and motionless through my whole being under the palsy of this dread chill and calm.

But just then I heard a sudden start and

rush above. A heavy dash upon the floor as of the sick man leaping from his bed, and then amid cries and sound of footsteps the jarring noise of the suddenly opened window. Without a moment's pause I started up, and flew to Dr. Burnet's room. He was standing at the open window, a ghastly figure, shaking with convulsive tremblings, while Mary and my mother, one at either hand, held him with a force which only desperation could have given them. He struggled so, that it almost seemed to my excited fancy in that one rapid glance, that Mary's wrist would snap across like a wand under the contortion and pressure. I flew upon him almost in a fury, dashed down the window cruelly upon his hand, and dragged him into the centre of the room. In his time of strength Dr. Burnet could have prisoned me with one grasp of his strong arm—now his weakened frame was gigantic with the might of madness. I clung to him

like a tiger—I was half mad too, with excitement, frenzy, rage. I heard cries, remonstrances, wild adjurations, and pleadings, the mingled voices of Mary and my mother as though I heard them not. I was not even sensible that their grasp restrained and burdened my ghost-like antagonist. I only knew they hindered me, as I shook them off blindly and dragged the patient again towards his bed.

How I did it I cannot tell, but I succeeded—and with a wild palpitation in every pulse, I forced him down upon the couch he had left. He was glaring at me with mad eyes—the look haunts me still—and raving on continually in a loud confused stream. I was conscious of an authority in my own voice, a strange threat and command in my gesture, as I held him sitting up upon his bed—and it seemed to awe the unhappy spirit as much as it startled myself. We were both "possessed," as in half embracing conflict

we struggled with each other—he by the tormenting imps who avenged so direly his wasted life-time—I by some strong spirit, fit to hold the demon down.

"I tell you they're there yet—every one of them," exclaimed the Doctor furiously. "Would you bind me, curse you! to the torture, and a hundred imps of darkness waiting, that seek no better sport. Satan, Belial, Moloch, a man might sit down with *them;* but you see the little furies with the blue flames running among their hair, and licking the very bloodless cheeks of them, and the red hot arrows in their hands. Away, I tell ye! away! am I to be killed—am I to be tormented—and my own very flesh and blood carrying a torturing devil on her shoulder when she pretends to help me? Will you light on Mary? will ye burn your mark on *her?* Let me go till I dash him to the earth."

And the unhappy man aimed a desperate

blow at Mary's shoulder. She started back, but not without receiving the stroke in broken force. I did not turn to save her, but I grasped with a cry his waving arm in mine, and shook him in fierce passion Again he owned the restraint.

"Ye can grip *me*," said the patient turning to me suddenly, "you can hold me firm that once could have mastered a score like you! Cannot ye sweep the room of *them?* I tell you there's no such cowards on the face of this earth, if ye turn on them with a stout heart. I see you've a young face—I see they're changed all into fairies and dancing elves at the sight of you—that's their wile—I saw them myself twenty years ago like merry dancers, every one with its trick and prank and its look of merry mischief. Do you think *I* could believe there was ill in them? but I see the imps of Satan now—I see them now!"

And shaking his clenched hand, as he

looked fiercely round him, Dr. Burnet half yielded to my coercing effort to lay him back upon the pillow. He was already half reclining, resting on his elbow, when a sudden change came over his face, and putting my arm aside with a strength no longer mad and infuriated, he raised himself once more and sat erect upon the bed, bending forward as he seemed to trace with keen curiosity some one passing from the door to a remote corner of the apartment. So fixed and vivid was his gaze, and such an impression of reality was produced upon us by its eager watch, that we simultaneously turned to see who entered. The door was slightly quivering on its hinges with the wind, and with a shiver of dread my eyes followed the vacant line of air into the corner. Nothing but space and vacancy, and the blank atmosphere with its tingle of silence, was there, but when I turned again to see the rigid

contracted lines of this absorbed face, the knitted brows, the eyes gleaming out with such desperate intentness, an involuntary shudder came over me. Heaven knows what startling powers of vision may be withheld from ordinary sight. Whatever was present to the tortured mind of this dying man, he saw it with his eyes.

He had felt me tremble; and with an unspeakable softening of relief in those strained eyes, the patient turned them with a momentary glance on me.

"You see him then, you see him?" said the Doctor, in an eager whisper. "See you who it is, laddie; the Master Fiend, the greatest of them all. It looks like a great cloak of sable, yon, he has upon his shoulder; and I have seen a pale dark sky like that face—will he speak—or, think you, what can bring him here?"

And then I felt as he leaned back upon

me, convulsive shiverings come upon the frame of the sufferer, and his eyes grew agonized in their gazing.

"Neither a motion, nor a word—nothing but look at me—look at me," said the Doctor, "oh, his eyes, his eyes, they burn into my soul! My God! my God! what brings this terrible fiend to me!"

And breaking from my hold, he plucked at the curtains of the bed, and drew them close with a vehement wrench. A momentary calm came to his face as the veil fell between him and the fatal visitor whom no one saw but he—but in another second he was stealthily lifting the drapery, to cast another look of strange horror-stricken fascination towards the haunted spot. Then he fell back with a heavy groan and clasped his hands over his eyes. This movement too was but momentary—the fingers relaxed—the hollow strain of vision returned—and through the drawn curtain and the shading

hands, you could see his soul writhing in its every faculty under the fixed and pitiless glare of these visionary eyes.

He lay thus for some time, motionless, bound, as it seemed, and rigid under this terrible spell. Now and then he turned his head away for a moment—the fascination, whatever it was, held him too strongly for escape. I myself, still bending over him, followed his gaze with involuntary sympathy. My whole frame had been quivering before with the excitement and wild exertion by which I had subdued his frenzy; now the moisture began to hang heavy upon my brow, my lips grew hot and dry, and shivers of intense agitation shot along all my nerves. I seemed to feel on my own shrinking heart the terrors of that great pitiless Eye.

On the other side of the bed my mother stood looking on in silent horror. Near myself was Mary, very pale, but self-possessed and collected still; and I felt even now in the

hour of extremity, that red flushes of shame for the exposure of her father's dreadful malady, came sometimes like a breath of fire over Mary's brow.

After a considerable interval thus spent, Mary went to prepare some draught for the sufferer. In doing so, she stood directly between him and the spot to which his eye turned; the candle upon the table threw a shadow of her figure upon the drawn curtain—I saw it fall upon Dr. Burnet's eyes like a grateful, refreshing shade. The eyelids quivered with sudden relief—there came a gradual relaxation to the rigid lines of his face—a long gaze followed, of half incredulous, half joyful anxiety, and then the worn-out nature sank into sudden prostration—the eyes closed, and a burst of feeble weeping came out of the tortured heart.

By this time, the chill gray dawn was slowly breaking upon the wide, universal glimmer of snow. The windows were clogged

and burdened with miniature wreaths; the sounds of early morning life rose muffled and faint to break our vigil, and Mary's serviceable neighbour sought admission below. My mother let her in, and Mary now ventured to leave the place where I had signed to her to remain, and extinguishing the feeble candle, admitted the pale and faint daylight into the sick room. The Doctor lay still, entirely worn out and exhausted with his eyes closed. He was quite quiet and manageable in his weakness—the delirium for the moment was gone.

Mary said little to us as she went with us to the door—for I was now compelled to prepare for my walk to Edinburgh, and my mother's interest, deep as it was in Mary, was not enough to induce her to suffer my departure unrefreshed. We said good-morrow solemnly; but though Mary, I saw, had much ado to keep down her tears, her heart did not seem to melt to us with the

tenderness wherewith mine expanded towards her. I thought this very vigil, and my share in subduing our unhappy patient, should have endeared me to Mary, but there seemed instead, a half alienation in her self-absorbed, preoccupied woe.

CHAPTER XXI.

It was well that my duties in the office were mere affairs of routine, mechanical and unimportant. I was innocent of the irregularities and tendencies to dissipation so common among my fraternity, yet singularly enough my advancement seemed to lie under some weight of moral impossibility. I got on from day to day after the same commonplace fashion—reported to be clever, known to be trustworthy, yet somehow never elevated into the regions of responsibility—never progressing into any natural advancement. But on this particular Monday, it was well

for me that I remained only Mr. Middleton's junior clerk.

My mind was intensely self-occupied for the time, my faculties all blunted and deadened with past excitement, and with the unusual vigil. A hundred perplexities about Mary filled my troubled mind—could *I* venture—*would* she—on a kindred rashness to Jamie's—a mad, imprudent loving marriage of which good might come beyond our hoping. I thought of myself for a moment with involuntary self-approbation, which was not vanity—of how few personal wants I had, and how much devotion to those most dear to me. I was not vain, but I felt for a moment, with a little flush of confidence and hope, how little I would grudge labour or pain or weariness to gain an added comfort to my wife. True I had not made the chance; I had gained no additional step; made no venture upon the future; but it was not a false assurance in my own heart

which convinced me that however I gained them, Mary should not want even such humble graces and luxuries as were consistent with her training and with mine, if she trusted herself to me.

And with this belief undoubting and confident, conferring a little warmth upon the heart which could not choose but draw back with some chill and discouragement, when it ventured to question what Mary would decide, I went to our lodgings hurriedly to warn Jamie and Sybil of the circumstances which again called me to Ailieford, and set off for home without delay. I could not afford the coach, and the roads were deep with snow; all fleeced and feathery, dropping now and then a chill tear-drop upon the hard beaten snow path under them, the trees stretched their gaunt arms against the dim twilight-sky as I began my journey. Then came the hollow roar of the sea, breaking strangely with the full tones which no

frost could limit, upon the heavy atmosphere which muffled every lesser sound. Then the dark country road, from Moulisburgh, with the faint glow from a cottage window scantily scattered here and there for its sole enlightenment, and then upon the solitary wintry wayside I came to Dr. Burnet's house.

Through the little garden I saw a soiled and beaten line of footsteps on the snow. Faint light was in the curtained window of his own room—light in the parlour below, cold and uncheerful; I turned to the adjoining house, to ask, before I ventured to seek admittance there—and I was right in my instinctive certainty. He was dead.

Then with awe and gravity I went to Mary's door. Mary's door—Mary's house—she was alone now in her dreary proprietorship; my heart stirred restlessly within me, longing to be with her, to comfort her—yet I was held back by some strange restraint—

after all, though I had a right to bestow my sympathy and regard, it might turn out other than acceptable to my betrothed. And this fear suddenly chafed me almost into anger; I grew provoked and impatient at the thought.

The door was opened for me by my mother. She admitted me without surprise, and led me quietly into the vacant parlour. I almost fancied my mother, under the grave looks which became the place and time, carried a little annoyance and impatience too.

"She took an hour or two's rest after it happened," said my mother, "and is wonderful well now, poor thing, and composed enough, considering. She's putting her own room in order, for fear her uncle comes to-night, and, indeed, I wish he was here, for it's a dreary thing to see the lassie her lane with everything to think of herself. I hear her on the stair, Willie. I'll just let her

come in without saying you're here, for after a' that's come and gone, you two bairns should be one another's best comforters."

And Mary came in by-and-bye, after my mother had left the room. The little start with which she discovered me, melted immediately into a sudden burst of natural sorrow. How she might have been had anything prepared her for seeing me, I cannot tell; but as it was she held out both her hands with the unchecked natural impulse, cried, "oh, Willie, Willie!" with an appealing trustful tone which was very joy to me, and leaned on me as I sprang to her side with unreserved and confident affection.

I put her in her own chair gently. I soothed her weeping as I could, and Mary wept long without restraint, her tears falling heavily on my hands, and her heart lightened with the overflow. Little said I except her name—little was there of comfort to say—it was well he was gone out of the life which

held no more hope or possibility for him—but whither, whither? and we shrank from the question with dread and fear.

I was kneeling beside her, supporting her, and her tears were flowing more quietly, when Mary started and lifted her head to listen to some sounds without. A vehicle drew up before the house, footsteps came quickly across the garden, and through the door, which my mother had already opened, we heard a strange voice ask for Dr. Burnet. Mary started up hurriedly, and put back her hair from her cheeks. "It will be my uncle," she said, composing herself with an effort, "stay, Willie, stay, he had better see you here."

For the first time, I became anxious about this uncle, who he was or what—for he had never been spoken of till this extremity came. The door opened abruptly; the cold wind rushed into the room, making Mary shiver, and with it entered a strong, tall, vigorous

man, with a purple glow upon his face, and the developement of a Hercules in his frame. He caught the door with a swing of his long arm, as it was closing behind him, cast a single quick glance of discomfort round the room, and then curved his bushy eyebrows upon his niece as she stood before him.

"Mary Burnet? I am glad to see you," said the new-comer, holding out his hand, "but I hear I am too late to see my brother."

The words were spoken gravely; but much as if this brother had set out for America or Australia, and might be heard of conveniently again, with no great harm done by missing him now; but Mr. David Burnet expected his niece to cry, and patted her not unkindly on the shoulder, as she hastily wiped the tears from her eyes.

"It's many a year now since John and I met last," he said with some feeling. "We did not part the best of friends then; but that's

long past now; I have lost no time you see, Mary, in answering your letter, and am here now, fully prepared to look after everything necessary. I should have been glad to have seen him, poor fellow! was he in a good frame at the last?"

More bitterly than before Mary wept, and her tears choked her voice—she could give no answer.

"He went away in a sleep," interposed my mother, quickly, "easy and quiet which was a good sign; but Mary, my dear, your uncle is chilled and wearied, off his journey, and you must compose yourself, like a woman, and see to make him as comfortable as can be in the circumstances. She's a young thing, Mr. Burnet, to be left here lone in the world; but Mary has sense far beyond her years, if she had but the first shock past."

"Ay," said Mr. Burnet, regarding my mother somewhat curiously, and turning a still more abrupt investigation upon me, "I

have to make acquaintance with my niece yet, and—but I'm glad to see she has some friends."

"I knew Mrs. Burnet when we were both young," said my mother, with some dignity, "and Mary has come about my house since ever the Doctor settled here. This is William Mitchell, my son. If Mary and you have nothing more to say to each other, Willie, you'll be better rested, and more comfortable at home, and if I am not at Ailieford within an hour, you can come back for me. The fire's burned low; but the room will soon warm again. Sit down, Sir, and I'll send your bag up the stair. Such distress in a house makes everything dreary, but it's easy mending that."

And, catching another discomfortable glance at the expiring fire, and round the chill dark room, from the new-comer's keen eye, I left my mother ministering to his comfort. Without the parlour door, I met

Mary, and was comforted with her good-night. No more coldness or preoccupation was in Mary's face. The arrival of the stranger relative seemed only the more to throw her upon the sympathy of her old friends, and Mary had learned to know that she could not do without sympathy. She clung to me, almost detained me, and chill as the snow-laden atmosphere was without, I waited out my mother's hour, no farther removed from the walls that enclosed my poor Mary, than the few paces along the road which kept me within range of the lighted window. My mother stayed longer than the hour, and when I received her under my escort at last, I was half frozen—a man of ice—but again I bade Mary good-night.

CHAPTER XXII.

On the third day following, I attended Dr. Burnet's funeral. Our slow procession left his house at noon of a cold March day, full of chill sunshine, which only sufficed to melt the stained snow, and make the atmosphere humid with sudden thaw. In two hours all was over. We had laid him in the little church-yard at Moulisburgh, silently, with tearless eyes. The stranger stood at the head of the grave, sternly quiet and composed. I gave no expression to the secret ache and deep pity in my heart. The others had nothing but custom—the sobriety of

appearance which they put on with their black coats and weepers, to honour Dr. Burnet's grave withal. And so we left him—left him where the wet, upturned soil clogged the damp grass—where the sunshine drew only a chill rain from the herbage it shone on—where all nature seemed to shiver to the heart under the ineffectual light. We left him in his ruin and death with the past to which he pertained, and we of the present went upon our way.

When we left the church-yard, Mr. David Burnet separated himself with a little *finesse* from the other followers of the funeral, and strode away rapidly alone upon the Ailieford road. Well! these two had been children once cradled in the same house—boy companions—brothers; it might be that tender thoughts of this poor lost one, of whom all pronounced the dreadful sentence that "it was best," he should be gone, were touching chords long silent in his brother's heart.

Andrew took me to his house with him, ere I was permitted to return. Andrew's house was in the Bridge Street, of which Bell and Mitchell's respectable shop formed the corner; and there we found a comfortable little dinner awaiting us in a very comfortably furnished parlour. Yes, there was, after all, no inconsiderable difference between Christina's little fortune, and the tocherless bridehood of poor Sybil Wood.

"Andrew has to go to the shop; but you might sit awhile, Willie," said my little sister-in-law. "I want to ask you about Mary, and about Sibby, and ever so many things; and nacbody ever has a chance now of seeing you in Moulisburgh. They'll a' be busy at Ailieford. Stay a wee while—I want to speak to you."

And I stayed, though with reluctance, while Andrew went away to the shop, and Christina sat down by the fireside with her seam, touching her baby's cradle now and

then with her foot to keep the little sleeper still. Christina was twenty now, growing very sedate and matron-like, and took no small pains to show me how much she was mistress of her house, and what a careful, thrifty manager she was. Poor little Christina! my heart glowed proudly when I saw my own Mary exercise these same thrifts and homely economics—overflowed with a certain pathetic affection to Sybil in her limited housewifery, subdued and graceful, like some fallen queen; but I only was roused to smile at Andrew's little, prosperous, plentiful wife, with all her stereotyped appliances and conveniences, unknowing and unfearing any state different from her own. Yet the real good-humour and kindliness were undeniable in Christina's comely face, all guiltless of care or anxiety as it was.

"And what kind of a wife does Sibby make?" asked Christina, with a little laughter. "I thought she was far greater and grander

than ever to take up with Andrew's brother; for I'm sure, when I was married she looked down on me."

"Poor Sibby!" said I, "but she makes a very good wife, and is content with her fate, such as it is."

Christina laughed again, half incredulously, with a slight unintentional detraction. Sibby was of the visionary class, which gets itself set down beforehand as incapable of good wives.

"And what is Mary to do," said my sister-in-law. "Is she to go with her uncle, or are you to take her into Edinburgh? But I doubt if Mary Burnet would be content to set up with Sibby Wood," and another little involuntary laugh of conscious prosperous superiority rang over Christina's lip.

"We have come to no decision," said I, briefly. I had scarcely thought before of the first of these alternatives—of Mary going with her uncle. The idea came upon me

with a new pang, though indeed it was a natural idea.

"I'll tell you what *I* think, Willie," said Christina, laying aside her work to look with some interest in my face. "Andrew says it would be very bad of you to give up your situation, because places are so ill to get; but I think if you were just leaving Edinburgh and setting up a school here, you might do grand. There was auld Mr. Dudgeon; he left three thousand pound among his three daughters when he died; though, to be sure, he was a land surveyor too, and made something that way. But I'm sure I see no reason, Willie, why you shouldna do as well as him."

"I'm not a good scholar," said I, hurriedly, but I began to grow a little excited. The idea was a very palatable one.

"There's your ain cousin, Peter Anderson, has five sons," said Christina, "and my Uncle Alick has three, and Robert Grieve a great

big family. Then there's little Robbie here, when he comes the length; and plenty more that would be glad of a Moulisburgh man kent about the place instead of the new cripple Dominie in the parish school. And you could aye live on at Ailieford till you got a wife, Willie, and if she wasna far to seek, you ken—"

"Yes, it all looks very fine," said I in well-pleased haste, and some excitement, "but what if there is no foundation, Christina, to carry it. I'll not say what I might have been if I had made the most of the education I got, but as it is, I am not fit to be a schoolmaster; I would need to teach myself first."

"And what's to hinder you?" said Christina quickly. "I'm sure you wouldna be the first that had done that; then you see Mary Burnet could give the girls their afternoon's sewing grand, and you would come into a good income with very little trouble; for

you see, Willie, except the parish school, and Loretto Lodge where they keep boarders, there's no a place for decent folks' bairns in all Moulisburgh."

With great interest I paused and pondered, —not that the craft of schoolmaster attracted me as to my natural vocation. Far from that—for to tell the truth the very title Dominie conveyed ideas by no means dignified or flattering to my self-love; but I had begun dimly to apprehend my own incapacity to break through the daily office routine which bound me with a heavy bondage. What if I could make no chance, create no opportunity, and never reach to any higher end than the dreary ultimatum of mediocre clerkship? One finds very good things in this same mediocrity when sober old age contracts the horizon, and lessens the space of earthly hope; but it has something very chill and full of discouragement to the imagination of twenty-two.

Then there would be the thrifty country life—the means and opportunities of increase denied to townsfolks—among our own people too, in the familiar places, which habit and association made dear to us. I felt the flush of hope come upon my face—Mary —would Mary but consent?

"And then besides, Willie," said the prudent Christina, "you might even take a boarder yourself if Mary was to keep the furniture, and I've heard of laddies at Loretto coming from England, or even farther away places than England, with a grand stipend paid for them, and glad to hear of a good house to put them in. I think you have a taking way with bairns yourself, Willie, and Mary Burnet should beat us all at managing the house if it's true what folk say; and if you only got one at first, you might get more in time. I'm sure I would never grudge Andrew's friends prospering, nae mair than if they were my ain; no, even

if Mary Burnet was turning as grand a lady as Mrs. Dr. Dallas of Loretto, though I ken she would look down on me if she could, she's an upsetting thing in her real mind, for as much as you think of her now."

"It is very kind of you, Christina," said I, "to plan for us so; if anything should come of it, we'll say it's your doing, and even if it should only end in words, it will always please me to mind it. I thank you for the thought."

"But I'm no seeking thanks," said Christina, becoming a little shy and timid as real feeling stole into her moistened eyes, "only I think it would be a dreary thing for you to see Mary Burnet away, and her engaged to you —and never anybody crossed my will you see, and I wouldna like to be disappointed myself; and besides all that, I would be real glad to see you do well, Willie!"

I held out my hand to her with glistening

eyes. Yes, indeed, it was a very common-place little mind, an undisturbed every-day heart—yet one found little diamond flashes throwing back the sunshine. Gladdened and softened, I went upon my way; she was not like Sybil, our poor unappreciated lily, but my thoughts always brightened after that conversation when they turned to my brother Andrew's wife.

Chill with the molten snow which ran in a hundred little rivulets, making channels for themselves on the black pathway, was the Ailieford road; but the sun by dint of steady shining had wakened a little warmth in the air, and trees and herbs were flashing and glimmering with a thousand dewdrops. With misty ponderings, with sudden leaps of dreaming, I mused over Christina's plan. The first were of my own incapacity—of Mary's doubtful willingness—of ways and means which seemed above my reach; the last were vivid pictures of what might be—instant realizations of the school-room with

its bare benches—of the little house somewhere in the outskirts of Moulisburgh where Mary could light the ruddy fire, and make radiant the hearth of home. As I mused, Mr. Middleton's office grew faint and dim behind me. I saw in it nothing but the heavy disappointing process which fathers and mothers flatter their hearts withal, under the deluding title of "steady advancement." Steady advancement! something dependent solely on the gradual time which ripened a boy into a man, and then made the employer ashamed to offer to the grey-headed clerk the same income which he had given the youth; and I had very soon made myself sure that no exertion of mine could accelerate the natural pace of events in the office—that nothing was possible to me there, unless I purchased it by the heavy price of youth and my best years; whereas here, at least, in this new scheme was an independent field where character and mind weighed for something; and where there was

failure and success distinctly before me, the decision to be accomplished by myself.

I was not admitted then to an interview with Mary, but went home at once, with my mother, who had borne the orphan company during the dreary hours which passed between the setting out of the funeral procession and Mr. Burnet's return. We were to go there again in the evening, to hear the uncle's plans and intentions, by Mary's express desire; and in the meantime I poured into my mother's ears Christina's scheme for us, and my own strong inclination to adopt it. In combating my mother's objections, I forgot my own, and grew an eager partizan where I had only been a cool deliberator. My own incompetence, and all the other obstacles lying in the way vanished under this new suffusion of heat and zeal —and as for the security of my present employment, which my mother largely commented on, in contrast to the precariousness of this, I scouted the idea with infinite scorn.

Secure! why my only bulwark was the will of Mr. Robert Middleton, and Mr. Robert Middleton might have a nephew from the country to-morrow ready for my place—such a nephew I had even heard of, I fancied—and where was my security then?

"Weel, weel, Willie, I'm no saying you should positively pass by an opening, even though it is in a new way," said my mother at length in conclusion of the argument; "only think well of it, and be sure you're no deceived—and you can see at least what Mary says."

I had already resolved on doing so; and there was no hope of imprudence from Mary. The certainty of this half provoked, half satisfied me; and I postponed the subject until the time for our interview came.

END OF VOL. I.

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